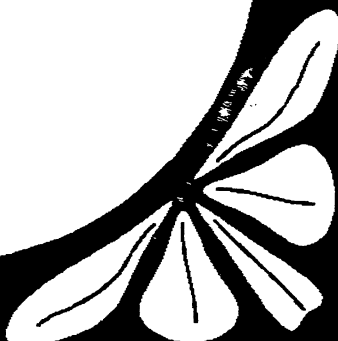
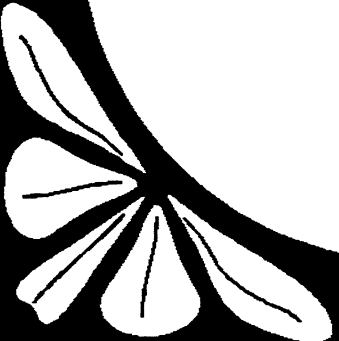


Just My Type 2

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WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T PRESS!

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Artwork:

Judy Breuer.....front cover

Mini-Editorial

Well, here we are, a second issue of Just My Type. I'd like to thank everyone for their warm responses and encouragement, but I'd like to ask that each of you send me an LoC instead of telling me in person what you thought of this or any of my other zines. LoCs don't just give me a great feeling, they also tell the authors and artists that their work is appreciated and inspires them to do more. In addition, other readers enjoy hearing what people think, whether or not they agree with their opinions. I'm doing my best to keep this tradition of printing LoCs alive, but I can only do it with your help. So, pick up a pen, turn on your word processor, boot up your computer, and send me an LoC, either by 'snail' mail or e-mail (M.Frank7@genie.geis.com). Let your voice be heard!

Clear Skies, Mysti

Letters of Comment

DESIREE CARROLL

Inman, SC

I loved Just My Type 1! I thought all of the stories were fabulous and very well written. My four favorites stories are the *Nick Knight* stories. I thought that the author did a very good job writing them and really 'knew' the universe she was writing in. I also loved the *Forever Knight/Quantum Leap* crossover. A crossover of two of my favorite shows. I read that story twice. Looking forward to Just My Type 2.

DONNA MEINKING

Racine, WI

This is my LoC for Just My Type 1. I purchased the zine at MediaWest Con. I enjoyed every page. I'm not a slash fan, but I've read it occasionally. I enjoy certain writers because they make you suspend your prejudices and just enjoy! Vampires have kinky sex lives anyway, so they really can't be classified. Also, I can go from one writer's universe to another's and enjoy well-written stories.

"Dying Year" was very well done, Karen Stortz. Your characters ring true.

I separate my two Nicks (*-Nick Knight and Forever Knight-*) into two different universes; both guys are great. B.N. Fish, I've read your four *Nick Knight* stories several times. Your erotic/relationship writing is subtle and superb! I loved your work in the Good Guys Wear Fangs zine also.

Just My Type 1 was technically well done. The print, layout, simple cover and price are just right. Do another, if you folks can. (*-Can and have.-*) And don't be afraid to use the two different Nicks. (*-Us, afraid? We thrive on both Nicks. Viva la difference.-*)

Oh, and I liked the poems, Mirennia's and Jane Milander's stories, too. Just a great zine all the way around.

MIRENNA

Ypsilanti, MI

Just a little note to tell you that I've read Just My Type 1. Nice job! The only problem I had with it was that I am unfamiliar with the characters in *Quantum Leap*, *Nick Knight* and *Blake's 7*. Alas! I do know *QL* a little, because of some slash stuff I've read about it, and I saw one episode of *Forever Knight* with that cute blond guy. Geraint, is it? *(-Geraint Wyn Davies.-)* But the *Blake's 7* crew, and LaCroix and Jean Pierre were beyond me... *(-We can fix that...-)*

I have to admit that despite my ignorance of most of the major players, I enjoyed this zine a lot. I was impressed with the *QL/Forever Knight* crossover—unique idea!

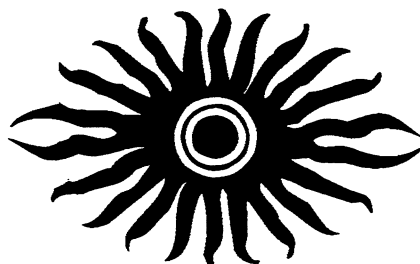
Then there was this Mirennia person. What kinda name is that supposed to be?

B.N. Fish—I don't know who this is, but his/her *(-her-)* writing is outstanding! I was rather jealous throughout, reading it. What other stuff has (s)he done? I loved meeting LaCroix and Jean Pierre; anything else these dudes have shown up in? I'd love to read it. *(-As Donna noted above, B.N. Fish has written several Nick Knight stories for Good Guys Wear Fangs, available from Mary Ann McKinnon, 254 Blunk Ave., Plymouth, MI 48170.-)*

Jane Mailander: I was delighted to see a piece by her in here! I've read some of her *Professionals* stuff that is just marvelous. I liked this piece, even though I haven't a clue as to the universe it's set in. You wouldn't want to elaborate on this, would you? I noticed the listing of *B7* zines on the back page, so you must be quite interested in the show. *(-Briefly, the show is about seven rebels who are on the run from the Federation bad guys in a 'big bloody ship,' trying to find a way to bring down the tyrannical dictatorship that is ruling the galaxy. Half-way through the show's four-year-run, nearly half the crew, including Blake, disappears or dies and are replaced by younger actors, meaning there's no Blake, and there aren't seven of them anymore, but, hey... As it's a British show, and Brits are big on devastatingly tragic series, it can be a real downer sometimes, but you can't beat it for the relationship writing. Try it and let me know what you think.-)*

I have this sense of foreboding that I may be seduced into liking this show, despite a group of friends who've warned me that it's really bad. I think that it's just 'cause I liked Jane's portrayal of Vila. Heck of a reason to get hooked on a series, isn't it? But then, I got hooked on the *Pros* just 'cause I liked the way Martin Shaw said, "Bodie..." That, and those cute curls!

Finally, I wanted to mention—a slash zine with no heavy, explicit sex—what a concept! (Not that I object to heavy, explicit sex, mind you, it can just get old fast! I mean, it's all been done, y'know?) Bravo!



AS YOU BITE IT



Wm Stakespeare
Infamous Playwraith
of Vampiric Verses



We will visit you at suppertime.

Gratiano, Merchant of Venice, 2,2

On a brick-wall have I climbed into this garden,
to see if I can eat...

Jack Cade, II Henry VI, 4,10

For yet, ere supper-time, must I perform
much business appertaining.

Prospero, The Tempest, 3,1

The dinner attends you, sir.

Anine, The Merry Wives
of Windsor, 1,3

He sups to-night with a harlotry.

Iago, Othello, 4,2

Moody food.

Cleopatra, Anthony & Cleopatra
2,5

This day she was pantler, butler, cook.

Shepherd, A Winter's Tale, 4,3

Eat your victuals, come, there is sauce for it.

Fluellen, Henry V, 5,1

Feed on nourishing dishes.

Desdemona, Othello, 3,3

Seeking the food he eats
And pleased with what he gets.

Song, As You Like It, 2,5

We'll fall to it with our teeth.

1st Servent, I Henry VI, 3,1

Injurious wasps! to feed on such sweet honey.

Julia, Two Gentlemen
from Verona, 1,2

SHAME

BY: TERA MITCHEL

Christina Noble, Doctor of Psychology, sat waiting in her office, nervously smoking a cigarette. Again she told herself that she should quit smoking, but not tonight. Her last client had left hours earlier. She'd even sent her secretary-assistant home 45 minutes early. Christina wanted, no, needed time alone, needed this time to herself before he arrived. She also found that she needed time after each session with him to collect herself. This was unusual for Christina; one could even say that it was strange. None of her other clients troubled her like this, even those whose traumas would have sickened any hard-bitten veteran. She was never sure why this particular client had this affect. It wasn't his anger or even a fear of violence; after all, part of her training had taught her how to deal with that. No, with this client, it was his cold, hard intensity that shook her. She often had asked herself if it could be what her client called his inhuman nature. His eyes were unquestionably terrifying, one minute everything would be normal and the next they'd change and chill her right to the bone. She shook her head; she didn't know nor did she want to think about it.

There were times when Christina wondered why she had taken him as a client. No. She knew why. When a former client had escaped from the hospital and tried to kill her, this man had saved her life. Now, she was repaying the debt.

It was time; he had arrived. She could hear him in the outer office. He was always punctual, never early and seldom a minute late. He wanted something and wasn't going to waste one second in reaching that goal. Nor was he going to waste time in a waiting room. *It's time to get to work*, Christina told herself. She placed her cigarette in a nearby ashtray, then reached to turned on a small lamp sitting on the table next to her. Getting up from her chair, she remembered that he insisted that she always turn off the overhead light before opening the door.

"Hello, won't you come in?"

As was his habit, he said nothing, just walked directly over to the window and looked out into the night. The atmosphere suddenly became heavy and Christina could tell it was going to be one those sessions. The light from the street lamps, shining though the blinds, created strange horizontal patterns across his face, making it difficult to read him. Knowing he had something to say, she patiently waited, giving him the opportunity to say it in his own time. Normally Christina never heard the street traffic, but this evening it seemed unusually loud.

Slowly and deliberately, he told the therapist, "I've decided that tonight will be our last meeting."

This did not surprise Christina, she had expected it. Picking up her cigarette, she asked, "Why you do say that? In the short time we've been together, you have progressed so well."

"Progressed? Well?" She could hear the anger in his voice. "Nothing is different. I came to you

because I wanted to be normal again... I want to human again. I was hoping you could rid me of these overwhelming morbid desires that I fight constantly. The anger, the guilt..." he paused for a split second, "...the shame and..." He stopped, either unable or unwilling to continue.

At last, she thought, *he has finally admitted to something more than just the anger*. She only hoped that she could help him to see that as well. Almost in a whisper, she asked, "Tell me, what is the guilt about?"

Slowly, he turned to look in her direction. He was searching, trying to find the right words to answer her question, to describe an emotion that he had never before admitted to and at the same time was fighting the urge to dismiss.

Christina waited in silence. She felt that if he ever hoped to be "human" again he had to release the anger. He had to acknowledge the pain caused by his guilt and shame.

"The pain I've caused...the way I must live... My entire existence!"

He delivered the last phrase with such venom Christina wasn't sure she wanted to continue. She took a deep drag on her cigarette, then clarified, "You mean your existence as a vampire."

"Yes!" he exploded, turning back to the window.

Christina decided to risk pressing the issue. "Tell me how you became a vampire."

The question visibly puzzled him. "I..." He paused. "I've told you before."

"You have alluded to it, but we have never discussed it. I want you to tell me, Nicholas Girard," she insisted, using the name her client was born with, not the name he used in his present life. "Tell me what happened."

The tension slowly drained from his body. He moved to sit in a chair not far from the window, making sure that he could still look out. Reluctantly, he asked, "Where do you want me to start?"

"Wherever you want," she replied.

"My comrades and I were returning home from a victorious campaign against some minor lords. Strange, I don't even remember their names or the reason we all went riding off. No, that's not true, I do remember, but no longer care. It's not important; it's meaningless now." His voice was faint and far away. "It had been a long, hard and bitter campaign, the brutality and senseless violence sickened even me.

"With the campaign over, it came time to return home. When we broke camp, some of us decided to split from the main body, taking a little-traveled mountain trail that was shorter, but too difficult for a large party. It was not what one would call a pleasant trip. The weather was freezing cold and rainy. The countryside was barren. Even the tree foliage was dark and sparse; there were no birds, deer or small game. This only added to the general depression of the group.

"After riding for three days in that god-forsaken country, we came upon a small village and decided to stop at the tavern. Our horses were tired and so were we. With a little food and far too much wine, we were soon feeling better. When night fell, we began to tell stories. Tales of the women we had conquered. The fighting we had done and how if it had not been for our swords, no battle would ever be won. The freer the wine flowed, the grander our stories became.

"It was there that I saw her for the first time. When she walked through the tavern door, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I'd never seen such beauty and her dark hair and eyes only added to the excitement. Though I knew that there were others in the room, for me she was the only one. Her eyes spoke to me, *Come with me*. They said, *Follow me, valiant knight*. *Come be with me, brave knight*. There was no way I could resist, even if I had wanted to.

"I followed her out into the darkness, not realizing I was leaving behind everything that had any value to me. She enticed me deeper and deeper into the forest, never letting me catch her, always just a few steps away. It seemed like it had been only moments, but hours must have gone by before we came upon a castle. It was more of an aging fortress, dark and forbidding, but I wasn't concerned. All I wanted was my dark-haired beauty and nothing was going to keep me from her.

"She entered through a side gate. Passing through, I noticed it was in such poor repair that it

wouldn't have taken much more than a strong wind to knock it off its hinges. She crossed the courtyard and stood by an open door, turning she again beckoned me to follow. I smiled because I knew it would not be long before I would hold her. Inside, it seemed unnaturally cold; there was only a single torch to light our way. I heard footsteps going up the stairs. I took the torch and followed. The higher I climbed, the colder the air became, but I was not going to stop. When I reached the landing I could see a light coming from a half opened door.

"The room was furnished with only a small table, a chair and a bed. I'd had enough of her games; now I was going to have my prize. I threw my torch into the dead hearth and grabbed her, kissed her hard and she returned it. I lifted and carried her to the bed, I kissed her mouth, her face, her neck and she returned them all.

"We began to make love as I had never made love before. Never had I felt so free, so uninhibited. We did things that night that would be considered evil and profane, even by today's standards. I was her slave! I would have given or done anything she wanted.

"It was then I heard, no, *felt* the presence of someone else in the room, standing in a dark corner. My beauty raised her fingers to my lips and spoke for the first time, 'Shhh, it is only the Master. Kiss me, gallant knight, love me.' I tried, but couldn't.

"I was furious—what kind of creature intruded upon a man and woman while they made love? Where had he come from? I couldn't understand how he'd gotten in without me seeing him. There were no windows. I would have seen him if he'd been there when I'd entered.

"What are you called?" he demanded. I was incensed and in no mood to take orders. It was too reminiscent of the many orders I had taken in the many past months.

"My lord, it seems that I am at a disadvantage. To whom do I have the honor and pleasure of introducing myself?" I asked. My tone was not what one would call courteous.

"The stranger only laughed, it was truly vulgar. 'I am called La Croix and this,' gesturing with his hand, 'is my humble abode, and you, one could say, are an intruder.'

"With all due respect, my lord," I answered, not showing much, 'I beg to differ with you. I was indeed invited, by the beautiful lady,' I replied, trying to remember where I'd laid my sword.

"Again, he laughed, sending a cold chill through me. 'Invited, yes, but by me. I sent the lady into the night looking for you.' He paused for a moment. 'Or for someone like you.' He smiled malevolently, stepping closer to the bed. 'I like you, as obviously does this sweet thing.' He leaned, reaching over me, to touch the dark-haired temptress' cheek. 'What do you think, my dear, should I gift him with immortality?' As his fingers moved deliberately down her neck, he again looked to me, 'What say you, Sir Knight with no name? A chance to live forever!'

"Trying to push him away, I made the mistake of looking directly into his face. I tried, but couldn't take my eyes away from his. I couldn't move.

"He moved closer, seducing me with the pleasures and privileges of immortality. I remember closing my eyes, hoping that when I opened them again, he'd be gone. He wasn't. He was so close that he was almost lying on top of me, demanding to know if I wanted to become what he was. He kept moving closer, baiting me until to my everlasting shame, I told him, 'Yes!'

"That night, I become a vampire and that creature became my master."

Christina found his story to be intoxicating. She knew her client believed every word, and she found it hard not to believe it herself. Cautiously, she asked, "Tell me you feel."

He closed his eyes and took a long, slow, deep breath. "Shame, contempt."

"Why is that?" Christina asked.

"I made a choice that night," he replied, "a choice that has haunted me for hundreds of years." She could hear the anger building. "Each night is a reminder of my avarice for allowing myself to become a creature of the night, preying on humans for their blood."

Now Christina's training and experience came into play. She knew if she could get him to listen, to

accept himself, to stop his self-destructive thinking and behaviors, he could have what he wanted. "What would have happened if you had refused LaCroix's 'gift'?"

He turned and looked at her as if her question had not made any sense.

Christina tried again, "What would have happened if you had said 'No'? What would LaCroix have done?"

He sat, staring into nothingness. Christina knew she had to wait. He had to allow himself to be open, to look at himself differently; otherwise, he would never be able admit the truth or accept himself.

"I have not wanted to think about this for centuries," he said in a self-ridiculing manner. "My lover, my dark-haired beauty, had drawn me there as prey." He stopped for a moment. "The worst part about accepting LaCroix's 'gift' was that I lost something important to me—my humanity. I should have died that night! I was a warrior; I had faced death hundreds of times before. I had respect, integrity and decency. Instead, I gave that all away to become a despicable, worthless inhuman monster."

Christina decided to try a different approach. "When you made that choice were you aware of the consequences? You have a chance that few people ever get. A chance to regain what you've lost, to find your humanity again."

"What? How? I-I don't understand," he stuttered, confused.

"By doing what some call 'repenting your sins' and living each day as honorably and as humanly as you can." Christina was getting excited—he was open and listening. "I want you to understand, it won't be easy. You will have to make many difficult decisions."

"But all the pain, all the suffering I have caused..." He couldn't finish.

"Your choice—and its repercussions—were a matter of survival. Nothing can be done for those lost souls, but there are things that you can do for yourself. You have another choice now: continue indulging in your 'morbid desire,' or live each day honorably, ethically and as humanly as possible. Consider it a penance."

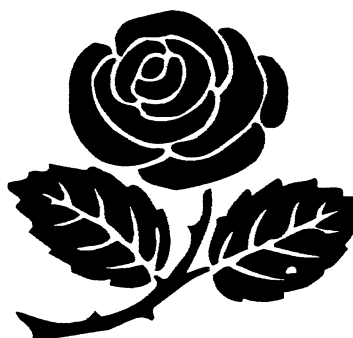
"What do you mean by living honorably?"

"I think you know," Christina said, pleased with herself. "As I said, you will need to make many difficult decisions. Deciding what 'living honorably' means is one of them."

He said nothing, but Christina noticed that he was almost, but not quite, smiling. The tension in the room had broken and they were both breathing easier. Smiling, she told him, "We have done a lot of good work this evening, but unfortunately, we've run out of time."

He turned and stared directly at her, something he'd never done before; he nodded, stood and walked to the door. As his hand touched the knob, he turned and said, "I guess we will be seeing each other again."

Somehow, Christina had been sure that they would.



Poison

by: b. n. fish

(Story #5 in *The LaCroix Chronicles*)

LaCroix saw an unknown vassal lounging against the door frame. "Yes?"

"Madame Lorraine has sent me for you," said the mortal.

The teacher turned back into his house to get his cloak and hat. They left together.

"Why?" LaCroix asked, not really expecting the stranger to know.

"It's about your boy."

"What boy?" Puzzled.

"The one who lives with you."

"Jean Pierre? What about him?"

"I was told only to fetch you."

The carriage ride took them to an alley. Another young man was waiting at the opening. LaCroix was led into the passage. Dim shadows revealed Lorraine standing to one side. Jean Pierre leaned up against a far wall.

"Ah, Misha," the beautiful woman greeted. "At last."

"What is it?"

"Something's wrong with Jean Pierre."

"What?"

A studied look revealed clothes that were in near shreds.

"Perdot found him here. There were three bodies. One of them of the Blood," the lady said.

"Jean Pierre?" LaCroix called.

No answer.

Lorraine put a gentle hand on his arm. "Nothing seems to be broken. He hasn't spoken since we found him. ...I don't think he can see."

The teacher nodded. "Jean Pierre," he repeated softly, as he stepped closer. No response. "Jean Pierre, look at me."

But again nothing. LaCroix noted the unfocused eyes and the body pressed flat against the wall. The young man was terrified. Another step and blue eyes turned toward him.

"Jean Pierre," the older man smiled.

But there was no recognition in the eyes. In fact, lips pulled into a snarl. Hands became claws. His acolyte might be afraid, but he was prepared to defend himself.

"It's all right."

A sound not even articulate enough to be a growl came through clenched teeth.

"Listen to me."

Hands came up. Couldn't he hear?

LaCroix motioned the vassal who had summoned him to approach the frightened young man from the other side. Whatever sense served Jean Pierre now wasn't sight or sound. It was some peculiar awareness of movement.

What had happened to him?

The summoner strode in close with a certain arrogance. Then the vassal found himself in an abrupt headlock. LaCroix was tempted to let his apprentice finish him. But the stranger possibly belonged to Lorraine. So the older man stepped in and took hold of his young friend from behind. The teacher had been prepared for a struggle, but not for the frantic mass of energy that fought in his arms.

"Be still," LaCroix hissed. "I won't hurt you."

Finally a backhanded blow snapped the young man's head back and into unconsciousness. It would have killed a mortal. As it was, the older man had had to use more force than was safe even with one of the Blood.

LaCroix made a quick search.

"I hoped he would know you," said Lorraine.

"You said there were three bodies," the teacher asked. "Who were they?"

"Gendain and two of his vassals." She grimaced. "They were armed...with a stake."

"What?"

"Unless Jean Pierre usually carries one?"

The older man hefted his friend up into his arms. "Thank you," he said to the woman. But his mind was on getting Jean Pierre home.

"I'll have Perdot bring you a bottle," she said.

LaCroix only nodded, as he left the ground. Minutes later, he came down on the roof top of his home. He then carried his burden down to the apprentice's bedroom. Placing him on the bed, the older man began a more detailed examination for injuries.

"One might ask," the teacher muttered to himself, "why it is that I seem to spend a good deal of my time undressing you."

He noted assorted cuts and bruises. There were too many for even an immortal's comfort. But they still didn't account for Jean Pierre's reaction. LaCroix was about to start on the lower clothing when he heard the knocker on his front door. Checking first that his charge was still unconscious, the teacher went down to the main floor.

It was Perdot, carrying a bottle. LaCroix took it and was about to shut the door.

"I could have knocked him out," the vassal commented suddenly.

"Yes," the older man said calmly. "I noticed how well you were managing it."

"I was told not to hurt him."

"Isn't it too bad that he didn't have the same instructions?" LaCroix turned to go.

"Do you have a message for Lorraine?" the other called after him.

"When I know something," he answered. Then paused. "Those three men. How did they die?"

"Broken bones. Throats ripped out," Perdot shrugged.

"And the Blood?"

"Wooden stake, well placed."

LaCroix nodded. "One thing more," the older man added before the other left, "if I ever hear you refer to Jean Pierre as my 'boy' again, I will personally place a stake of my own. And then, assuming you survive, I'll let him at you." He closed the door.

Even before he got up the stairs, he heard movement in his friend's room. Quietly, he stepped into the open doorway. Jean Pierre was blindly groping at his headboard. Then he reached out toward the table by his bed. He knocked over the candlestick, but it seemed to confirm where he was. The young man almost wilted with relief.

But then LaCroix stepped within that strange circle of awareness that surrounded the apprentice. Immediately the guard came up. Not the clawed hands, but fearful alarm as he sensed someone close by.

Moving quickly, the master took hold of Jean Pierre's arm. He let the young man touch him, his body and his face. As he did, the teacher watched the other.

In obvious pain, the acolyte, just as obviously, could not see. Then LaCroix found himself enveloped in a panicked hug, and shaking in unison with the young man's dry sobs.

"It's all right. You're safe."

His friend gave no indication of having heard.

"Jean Pierre?" The teacher took his friend's hand and put it on his own mouth. "Can you hear me, Jean Pierre?"

The young man frowned as he felt the lips move. He dropped his hand to his teacher's throat.

"Can you hear me?" LaCroix repeated.

In desperation, Jean Pierre put his ear to his mentor's mouth.

"Have you ever been afraid of me?" the teacher asked softly.

Something in the young man's throat gurgled.

"Talk to me, Jean Pierre."

His friend gagged.

"Easy. Here," the older man said, putting the bottle into his hands.

But the apprentice could only down the smallest of sips.

"Open your mouth."

No reaction.

Gently, but with some insistence, the teacher forced down the other's jaw. The teeth were sound, but within that half circle of bone, raw flesh disappeared down the young man's gullet. LaCroix let the trembling mouth close.

"You drank his blood, didn't you?" the teacher said sadly. "Poison. I told you the blood of our own kind is poison to us. Why must you learn the hard way, Jean Pierre?" He took the young man into his arms. "You will be fine," he murmured. "You're alive. As long as you have that, you can recover." The older man continued to rock his charge a few moments longer. "Let's look at the rest of you," he said finally.

Slowly, LaCroix removed the rest of Jean Pierre's clothing. He allowed the young man to rest his hands on his own, as the ragged linen was pulled free.

"You never fight me, do you? Never argue my right to do this."

There were more abrasions on his abdomen and lower limbs. The teacher rolled his patient over to his stomach. LaCroix then put a steadying hand high above the small of the shaking back.

High because most of the muscle and skin below were covered with a hodge-podge lattice work of bruises. Some of those bruises showed traces of blood, especially around the lower curve of the buttocks. With careful fingers, LaCroix parted the tucus. Blood clots and splinters. Grimly, the teacher arose from the bed to find some rags.

A fearful arm reached out and caught his.

"It's all right," the older man droned, as he patted the hand. "You'll be all right." He wasn't sure how much Jean Pierre could hear, if at all. But the smooth resonance of his voice could possibly give some small amount of comfort. Certainly LaCroix had very little, as he removed the wooden shards and wiped away the blood. He then propped the young man up on his side and put the bottle in his hands once more. "Drink."

Jean Pierre shook his head.

"You must drink," said the teacher, pushing the bottle toward the injured mouth. "I know it hurts. But it's the only thing that will help."

Finally the young man complied. But he was still only able to drink barely a quarter of the bottle.

"Very well." The master finished the rest himself.

LaCroix moved to dispose of the bloody rags and what was left of Jean Pierre's clothes. The young man reached for him as he lost contact.

"It's all right. I'm right here."

The teacher sat back on the bed. Hands clutched at him.

"You know that I'm here."

Trembling fingers found his mouth. LaCroix licked at the passing digits and he smiled. After a moment, so did the young man. But then Jean Pierre choked and bent over in pain. Quickly, the older man pushed him back and stroked the young throat. Eventually the contraction passed. Dry sobs returned. LaCroix settled in next to his acolyte and pulled up the sheet. The young man held him close. Finally the apprentice slept. The master only dozed.

The day passed slowly.

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Before sunset, the teacher got up and gathered the stinking pile of cloth. He put it downstairs by the back door. Then he tended his own toilet in his room in the cellar. At one point he heard Jean Pierre moving in the room above him. The young man was leaving his bedroom.

Puzzled but not alarmed, the master finished changing his clothes and started up. He heard his friend shuffle on the stairs.

LaCroix found the young man feeling his way down the steps. Nude and limping, Jean Pierre stretched out one hand to find any obstacles, while the other hand clung to the wall in a desperate attempt at orientation.

Still blind. "How are you feeling?"

The young man continued to make his way down.

Still deaf. LaCroix climbed a few steps and then waited for his apprentice to come to him. Some part of his mind noted the composition the young man made as he descended the staircase.

Jean Pierre's breathing was ragged. He stopped momentarily to attempt to bring it under control.

The teacher nodded. The young body fairly reeked of fear. But still he came. Finally he sensed the presence of his teacher, or at least, of someone. The apprentice blinked as if trying to see into the darkness. The hand searched.

The older man put out an arm. Anxious fingers found it and cautiously explored the hand. Something there identified him, as he found himself surrounded by young arms.

"You're safe now," he whispered into an ear.

The young man tried to take deep breaths. The teacher sat both of them on the steps. The apprentice continued to grasp the master's arm.

LaCroix lifted his chin to look into dim eyes. "Can you hear me?"

The young man stared blankly at him.

Gently, the master touched Jean Pierre's temple. Frantic hands clutched at his wrist. The older man sent the thought, *//You're safe now.//*

The apprentice winced but didn't let go.

//Remember? Put your thoughts into words and direct them to me,// LaCroix instructed softly.

Jean Pierre closed his eyes in concentration. But he groaned in response.

The teacher patted his arm. *//Very well. Let it go for now. You can hear me?//*

The young man nodded.

//Are you in pain?//

The apprentice shrugged. He held up thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

//Are my thoughts causing you pain?//

Jean Pierre hesitated, and then nodded. Then he shook his head. He reached for his teacher's head and then pointed to his own.

LaCroix nodded. *//But I'll try to keep my comments to a minimum.//*

The young man sighed, as he frowned. Gesturing, he mouthed some words.

//I don't know what happened, the teacher replied, exactly. It will have to wait until you can tell me. Right now, we must go out.//

The apprentice touched his shoulders and ran his hands down his sides to a place just above his knees. He shook his head hopefully.

LaCroix smiled, as he tried to ignore his friend's trembling. *//The nightshirt? Well, it does serve a purpose.//*

Jean Pierre groaned and immediately regretted it, as pain crossed his face. He tried to swallow.

//Relax. Calmly now.//

The young man nodded.

//Stand up and turn around.//

Puzzled, the apprentice did so, clinging to the banister.

//Bend over.//

The young man hesitated, but then complied.

//Your most intimate places, remember? They are becoming more intimate all the time. I'm going to touch you now.//

The apprentice flinched when the teacher first put a finger on him. But he held his ground.

Superficially, the wounds were almost healed. What little of Lorraine's bottle the young man had drunk had done some good. But the real damage was internal.

//Sit down now. No nightshirt. Rest a moment.//

For an immortal to drink of his own kind's blood was usually fatal. The few that survived went insane. Mentally, Jean Pierre seemed well enough, all things considered. But the blindness and deafness were alarming. Were they permanent?

//How do you feel?//

A nervous breath and a shake of the head. The young man winced.

//Your head hurts?//

A nod.

//Are you ready?//

A delayed nod.

//Shall we go?//

Jean Pierre got to his feet shakily and turned. The master stepped in close to catch him in case the young man should fall. And Jean Pierre did fall. He collapsed, more accurately.

The teacher turned him over and was appalled to find his young friend convulsing. Quickly, LaCroix cleared the mouth, and after breaking off a slat from the baluster, he shoved it into the chattering teeth.

//Easy. Relax.//

But to his dismay, the apprentice then began to relax too much.

//Jean Pierre. Can you hear me?//

Nothing.

The older man tightened his hold and his thoughts. *//Jean Pierre.//*

Still no reply. The body in his arms was limp now.

//Jean Pierre!// he called, penetrating deeply into the young man's mind. *//Please.//*

He was close to giving up when something touched his consciousness. LaCroix refocused his

attention on that brief contact. *//Jean Pierre, can you hear me?//*

Suddenly, the young mind was there, aware and sparkling with curiosity. *//Misha,//* he greeted brightly. *//Have you come to say goodbye?//*

//I have not.//

//I'm dying,// the apprentice announced. *//Or am I dead?//*

//Not yet.//

//It feels so strange. Even more than when you brought me across. I can see so many things. So many things to learn.//

//No, Jean Pierre.//

//You're crying. I thought we couldn't cry.//

//Here, I can. I have no physical limitations in your mind, my friend.//

//You can't stay here. You'll die with me.//

//I won't let you go. I won't be alone again.//

//Is loneliness so terrible?//

//Come back with me, Jean Pierre.//

//But it's dark there. And silence. There's no pain here.//

//Then I'll go with you.//

//No!//

//Then come,// the teacher called.

//Please. No...//

//I have buried so many. Will you leave me to bury still another?//

//Misha,// Jean Pierre protested.

But the young man was responding, reaching for his master's presence in his mind. Slowly, he enfolded his essence around his teacher.

//Yes,// LaCroix said with satisfaction.

The older man withdrew from those too deep places where death waited. As he did, he pulled Jean Pierre with him. When he could truly see again, the teacher was surprised to find the figure at his feet still breathing, but quite lax. *//Jean Pierre?//*

//Yes!// came laughter. The mind voice was within his own head.

//Who is that?// the visitor asked.

LaCroix frowned and closed his eyes in concentration.

//Hey! What happened?// the apprentice demanded.

The older man opened his eyes.

//That's better,// Jean Pierre said. *//For a minute I thought I was blind again. ...What happened to him?//* Before LaCroix could answer, he felt the realization hit his friend. *//It's me,//* the mind voice cried. *//Dear God, no.//*

//Hush, now. You're safe.//

//I'm still blind, aren't I? And the pain is still there, in that body. ...Somehow I'm seeing through your eyes. How?//

//I don't know. Come.// The teacher stood and then stumbled when he took a step.

//You're supporting me, aren't you? And the pain?//

//I'll manage...at least until we can get some blood in you. Come. You still have to direct your body.//

The body in question made its way past the older man and down the stairs.

//And you call that beautiful?// the apprentice asked critically.

LaCroix watched the battered figure land heavily on each step. *You're alive. //Yes,//* he sent.

//You're crazy.//

Perhaps, the teacher thought as he tried to subdue the waves of pain that weighed heavily upon

him, along with the consciousness of his friend.

//Are you all right?// Jean Pierre asked.

//I will be...when you are. But hurry.//

In the main hall, the teacher got the cloaks.

//Shouldn't I get dressed?// the young man asked.

LaCroix wrapped a cape around the naked form. *//So now you're anxious to wear the nightshirt again?//*

//You said I didn't have to wear that.//

//That's true. Don't worry. I'll protect your modesty.//

They went outside to a back alley.

//Can I fly?// came a hesitant voice.

//I doubt it.// The teacher picked him up in his arms and nearly fell.

//Can you do this?// Jean Pierre asked.

//Yes,// the teacher gritted out, as he left the ground.

He would make it. He had to. How had the young man survived this agony? LaCroix didn't understand this odd affinity of minds between them. But he could at least endure it until they found a source of blood.

That source turned out to be in a stockyard.

The teacher landed awkwardly in the soft earth. He leaned against a nearby steer while he continued to brace his apprentice.

//Let me go back,// Jean Pierre said grimly. *//I'll be all right.//*

//In a moment.//

//It's killing you.//

//I, too, will be all right. Now, drink.//

The young man placed himself against the animal and opened his mouth. But nothing happened. His blood teeth did not lengthen. *//I can't,//* the apprentice groaned.

Wearily, the older man nodded. After using his own teeth to break the skin of the animal, LaCroix stepped back. *//Drink.//*

The apprentice drank until the steer collapsed.

//Jean Pierre,// the teacher called softly.

//Is it dead?//

The weakness that overwhelmed him surprised the older man. It had been a long time since he had felt so frail. *//Jean Pierre, I'm sorry.//*

LaCroix sensed the young man's presence leave him as he fell. And then a numbness closed in around his mind.

When he became aware again, the teacher was almost hit by the smell of old and new manure. As he tried to move away, he found himself in bare arms, being held next to a bare, male body. A trembling hand touched his face. Blank, blue eyes hovered above his.

"Jean Pierre?"

The only reaction the older man got was a filthy hand moving along his cheek. *Still blind and still deaf. //How do you feel?//*

The apprentice sighed with relief. He nodded and then he tapped LaCroix's chest.

//Only tired,// the master answered. He got to his feet. *//Let us leave here.//*

The young man nodded again. They walked through a gate and down to the river to clean up. Most of their combined clothing was past recovery, but some sense of propriety had to be maintained as they flew home.

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Back at the house, LaCroix relieved the apprentice of his cloak and then dumped it in the corner of his room with his own, to be disposed of later. He guided Jean Pierre to his bed. Then the teacher collapsed into it after him.

They both slept through most of the next night as well.

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LaCroix waited until the young man was awake before attempting to leave the room. *//Wait here, //* he ordered and left. A few moments later, he returned. *//Can you speak? //* the teacher greeted.

"I...don't know," the young man croaked.

//It's something. What about mind speech? //

//What should I say? //

//Much better, // LaCroix nodded.

//What are you doing? // Jean Pierre asked.

//Changing my clothes. //

The young man sighed.

//What is it? // the master asked.

//I wanted to see you in the nude one day. And here you are and I can't. And never will. //

//You don't know that. //

//Do you? // the young man challenged.

//No, // LaCroix admitted. *//But you are alive. That in itself is an asset. You should, by all rights, be dead, even from the little I know that happened. //*

//And what is that? //

//You drank immortal blood, my friend. Others have died from such things, not just been blinded. //

//Just? //

//Just, // the teacher repeated. *//You will recover. //*

//How can you be sure? It's been... How long? //

//Three days. //

//Three days and I can hardly talk now. //

//But that's more than you could do three days ago. Lay down. //

Jean Pierre fell back in the bed. *//An eternity of darkness, you said, //* he whispered.

//I've said many things. There are times when I could wish that you didn't remember quite so well. Move over. //

//I'm all right. I don't hurt any more. //

//Don't you? // LaCroix asked skeptically.

//I have to learn to deal with it. //

//You will. // LaCroix studied the young man. Jean Pierre huddled on the mattress. Young eyes were squeezed shut as he pulled his arms tightly around his torso. The teacher sat on the narrow edge at Jean Pierre's side. *//You're not alone, my friend. //* He pushed the slender body toward the far side of the bed, and lay down, looping an arm around the nude shoulders.

//How did you do it? // the apprentice asked. *//How could I see through your eyes? //*

//I don't know. //

//But you took away the pain. //

//That I know, // LaCroix laughed. *//But I've never done it before. You are a rare find to link with me so well. //*

//A blind, rare find.//

//But no less precious for all of that.//

//Precious? I can find you a blind man on almost any corner. Or even Gabrielle.//

//I didn't choose them.//

//I wasn't blind then.// The apprentice was still enfolded on himself.

//It doesn't matter.//

//Doesn't matter?!// Jean Pierre parroted in outrage.

//Be still now. Give me your hand.//

//But how...?//

//Give me your hand,// LaCroix repeated with an edge.

Still the young man hesitated. The teacher waited. Finally Jean Pierre lifted some outstretched fingers. The older man took hold of the slim wrist. Then he placed the palm over his own breast. The young man sighed as he felt the muscle beneath the cloth. "I'm...sorry."

//There's nothing to be sorry for. You're not alone.// Then he said aloud, "And neither am I."

He felt Jean Pierre fall asleep in his arms. LaCroix soon followed.

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He came awake with his friend sitting up beside him. "Jean Pierre," the teacher said aloud.

The young man trembled. He was sobbing. The anguish was being vented even if the tears were denied him. LaCroix gave him a few minutes before touching his shoulder. Without a word, the apprentice turned into his arms. The older man embraced him.

"I never realized," Jean Pierre said aloud, "how much I hate the dark."

//You shouldn't. You've been in it for almost six months now.//

//It's not the same.//

//No. ...Come. You need to get dressed.//

//Why? I can't do anything,// the young man complained.

//Of course, you can. And what you don't know, you'll learn.//

//Learn what? I can't even draw.//

//There are other arts, Jean Pierre,// said LaCroix, patting a naked thigh. *//Tactile arts.//*

The young man straightened suddenly. *//Sculpture,//* he said.

//Yes,// the teacher smiled. *//And pottery.//*

//I've never worked in clay.//

//What about wax? Or marble?//

//I don't think I'm ready for the David just yet. But maybe....//

//Get dressed.// LaCroix watched the young man feel his way around the room and find his clothes. *//When you're ready,//* the teacher continued, *//we'll go out and feed.//*

//But I feel fine.//

//Jean Pierre.//

//I know. I know,// the apprentice said, as he re-buttoned his shirt for the second time, *//I need to eat.//*

//You will never get better unless you do.//

//You think there's a chance, then?//

//There's always a chance, my friend. Do you want me to help you with that?//

The apprentice was tackling the line of buttons yet again. *//I can do it.//*

//Good. Wait here for me. I'll be back in a little while.//

//I'll be all right.//

//Of course.//

The teacher disposed of yet another pile of clothing. Then he left the house, calling Shabot as he went. He was gone perhaps a half hour. He returned to see Jean Pierre fully dressed and rocking himself on the bed. But when LaCroix entered the room, he found himself the object of a blank stare.

//You can tell someone is close by,// the older man sent. *//But can you tell it's me?//*

//I'm not sure. I knew it should be you.//

The teacher nodded. *//Are you ready to go?//*

//Wouldn't it be easier just for me to stay here?//

//Easier for whom?//

//For me,// the young man admitted. *//But for you, too. If I can't take blood, just bring a bottle here.//*

//You don't know that you can't take blood now. You're stronger every minute that passes.//

//I don't feel very strong.//

//Regardless, I don't intend for you to hide here like a rat in a hole.//

//That's what it feels like: being in a hole,// said the young man. *//No light. No sound. Only your voice. And a bunch of furniture trying to grab at my shins and every other bit of anatomy I own.//*

//Jean Pierre.//

The apprentice sighed. *//All right. I'm coming.//* The young man grabbed for a long walking stick that was on the bed.

//What is that?// LaCroix asked.

//Gabrielle has one.//

//I doubt very much if she has one quite like that.// The older man watched Jean Pierre's hand on the ornate brass head.

//What's the design?// the young man asked. *//I can't tell. I found it in the back of the wardrobe.//*

//I had forgotten that it was here. You might make a point of keeping the handle covered if we meet anyone.//

//Oh?//

The teacher was silent.

Jean Pierre waited. *//Are you going to give me a hint, at least?//* he asked finally.

//I think not,// LaCroix smiled.

The apprentice frowned.

//Shall we go?// the older man prompted.

//You're testing me again.//

//I'm pushing you. You will adapt. You are no less the one I chose because you are blind. You will learn other ways.//

//You think I can?//

//Yes.//

//I wish I was so sure.//

//That's only because you're the one who must do it. I can help and I can push, but the action must be yours.//

Jean Pierre took a breath and stepped forward, almost into the edge of the dresser. *//I am glad you're here,//* he said.

LaCroix smiled, *//As I am.//*

They made their way slowly out of the house and into a carriage. To the teacher's chagrin, the young man refused to go to a crowded cafe.

//I can't use the hypnotizing speech, the apprentice protested. //I can't tell how they're reacting.//

//I believe you'll find that you can do more than you realize.//

//I know I need to feed, and every night, if there's to be even a chance of me ever getting out of this. But, please, can't we go to the stable?//

//Stable?//

//It's where I usually go. The horses know me.//

//Jean Pierre.//

//Please.//

//Very well. Where is this place?//

It took a bit of time to get there since they had only the young man's altered senses to direct them. LaCroix watched the apprentice move about the big animals. The horses did seem relaxed, as light hands ran over them.

"Hello, Chevalier," Jean Pierre murmured. He put his arms around the massive neck. Any doubt the master had about the young man's even partial recovery were laid to rest, as he watched the blood teeth appear. Jean Pierre drank. All too soon, he pulled away.

//You need more, the older man sent.

//Then I'll go to Muiset, the apprentice said, as he patted a tall shoulder goodbye.

Jean Pierre backed out of the stall and felt his way to another. It was an older horse this time, a gray mare. "Beautiful lady, how are you?" the young man greeted. He drank briefly. But then he continued to cling to the old horse.

//Is this the way it's going to be now? the apprentice asked. //You leading me from place to place? Me depending on you for everything?//

//Perhaps for now. But not for always. Blind or not, you are better. Blind or not, you will get better still.//

//You think it could be permanent? the young man asked, pulling away from the animal.

//I don't know.//

//Could. Would. Should, Jean Pierre said bitterly. //I—//

//Come, LaCroix interrupted. //We have a few things to do before we go back. We'll talk then.//

//What is there to talk about?//

//What happened to you, for one thing.//

//I think...I killed someone.//

//You killed three someones.//

//Three? And what about the others?//

//Others? the older man questioned.

//I saw five in the alley.//

Five? And you survived? //Come, the teacher admonished instead.

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They made two stops and then returned to LaCroix's house. In the studio, the older man set up some tools and clay on a table. Jean Pierre rolled it in his hands.

//Get familiar with it, said the teacher.

//It smells like dirt, the apprentice said, crinkling his nose.

//So you get to make mud pies again. ...Tell me what happened. Silence. The young man

flattened the ball of clay in his hands. The master stood beside him and laid his hand on a thin shoulder. // Tell me.//

//So much hate. ...What is a catamite?//

What?! //Is it something they said?// LaCroix asked calmly.

A nod.

//Where did you go that night?//

//To see Lorraine.//

//Why?//

//To ask her about a Christmas present for you.//

//Jean Pierre,// the older man said with impatience.

//I know. But in my family, we always celebrated Christmas. We were more apt to get a Christmas present than a birthday present.//

//I see. And did she give you any ideas?//

//A few. I just hope I can do something about them when it's time.//

//So you went to the Gallery,// LaCroix prompted.

//Yes. I saw them there. The two immortals, anyway.//

//Two immortals? Gendain and who else?//

//I don't know their names. I remember their faces. Not that it helps much.//

//It will. What happened?//

//I was walking. They called to me from a carriage.//

//By name?// the teacher asked.

//Yes. They asked about you.//

//Me? What did they ask?//

//How you were. Where you were. What you were doing.//

//And what did you say?//

//Busy. I wasn't sure. And that you had a commission,// the apprentice rattled off.

//What then?//

//They wanted to talk. I'm not sure about what. The next thing I knew we were in an alley. Then the two vassals were holding me while one of the Bloods was trying to ram me with a skewer. I don't remember much after that.//

//Tell me about the five.//

//Two Bloods. Two vassals. And a woman.//

//A woman? An initiate?//

//I don't know. Blooded. But not like Shabot. And not like the other two, either.//

//Describe her.//

//Pretty,// the young man sent. *//Around Jeanette's height. Dark hair, lots of it. Almond eyes, also dark.//*

//What was she wearing?//

//I don't think she was wearing anything.//

//What?!// LaCroix questioned.

//She had a cloak, and shoes, and gloves. But I'm not sure much else. I saw a few glimpses of a lot of skin. Of course, it could have been used to distract me.//

//Did it?//

//I guess it must have. I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. Then it was just reflex. Reflex, and I wanted to kill.//

//Not too late, my friend. Too late would have been dead. Describe the others.//

Unfortunately, the young man's memory seemed to center on the ones past secular justice. Except for the woman. Find the woman and LaCroix would be able to deal with the remainder of Jean Pierre's

attackers.

//We will find them, the teacher said. //The woman and her lord.//

//I'd like to know why. But I'm not much of a threat. Not now. Three of them died. That's enough vengeance.//

//And if they come after you again?//

Jean Pierre was silent a moment. *//Why should they? They wanted to hurt me. They did a very good job.//*

//And if they wanted to hurt me?//

The apprentice sighed. *//You're right. I know it. But not yet. Please, not yet.//*

LaCroix nodded. *//Not yet. ...When you're stronger.//*

The young man only bowed his head.

The teacher watched the clay taking shape under young hands. It was a human figure: a woman, nude. The proportions were off, not a great deal, but still noticeable when compared to the apprentice's two-dimensional work.

//Tired? the older man asked.

//Very.//

//Let's go to bed then.//

LaCroix tossed a wet cloth into Jean Pierre's lap. It startled his apprentice. But then the young man wiped his hands and covered his emerging statue. He got to his feet with his usual grace. Jean Pierre was recovering, slowly, whether the young man believed it or not.

//I am better, the apprentice said.

//I'm glad you agree.//

They left the room and started down the stairs.

//I mean, I don't hurt anymore. I'll probably be all right to sleep alone today.//

//Meaning you don't want me to stay with you.//

The young man sighed. *//No, but I want to try it alone.//*

//Do you?//

//No, but I should.//

//When you're ready is soon enough.//

//I'll never be ready.//

LaCroix studied his young friend, as they stopped in front of Jean Pierre's room. *//Very well. I'll watch you get into bed and then go to my own room.//*

The young man took a breath. *//Right.//*

The teacher watched and then withdrew.

He didn't like it. But the apprentice was correct. LaCroix was still arguing with himself as he fell asleep.

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After LaCroix woke, he returned to the young man's room. Jean Pierre was still asleep. The teacher found himself studying his friend's hands. He up turned the right palm and began feeling each finger in turn. It was then that the apprentice opened his eyes. *His still blind eyes.*

Jean Pierre wrapped his left hand around LaCroix's wrist. *//What are you doing?//*

//I'm investigating your hand.//

//Why?//

//I'm expanding my perceptions, the older man smiled.

Jean Pierre sat up and crossed his legs. *//I take the point, //* he sent. He began his own exploration of the teacher's hand. *//It's broader than mine. //*

//And yours is longer. //

//Is it? So it is. I don't know how you manage with the nails. I always run into everything when mine are anywhere near that length. //

//They make good tools. And weapons. //

Jean Pierre nodded, as he put his master's hand around his own throat. *//Tell me about immortals dying, //* he said.

//Later, // LaCroix shrugged.

//Now. I want to know. //

The teacher nodded. *//Upstairs, in the studio. Get ready. //* He withdrew his hand and watched the young man get dressed. It only took two attempts for the buttons this time.

"How did you sleep?" the older man asked aloud. There was no reply. *//I've sent for Denis, //* the master sent.

//Denis? Why? //

//For a model. //

It was almost true. The master had used the male prostitute as a model before. It was barely possible that Denis might even do some posing tonight.

//He won't be here until late. Three or four, // LaCroix went on.

//What about Gabrielle? //

Denis' blind ward had no place in LaCroix's plans for the evening. But she would cause no problems either by her presence, or lack of same.

//I'm reasonably sure he'll bring her with him. I doubt he will leave her alone at Claudette's, presuming she would let him. //

//I thought you didn't want them in the house unless they were bonded to one of us. Or have you done it already? //

//I said in your house. As for the taking, I'm still considering it. Unless you want to do it? //

//No. //

LaCroix nodded.

Now clothed, the young man reached out. He found his master easily, especially since LaCroix stepped into his searching hand. The apprentice lifted fingers to touch the older man's face. *//May I? //* he asked.

//Of course. //

Gently the young man traveled over the expanse of taunt skin. *//All angles and planes, //* said Jean Pierre. *//It's a good face. //*

//Thank you. //

The apprentice brushed his finger tip over his teacher's mouth. LaCroix refused to lick at it. He stepped back to the door.

//Shall we go? // he asked.

Silently, the young man nodded. He felt his way out of the room and to the stairs.

//You should perhaps practice speaking aloud, // said LaCroix following.

//Why? You're the only one I can hear. //

//Gabrielle and Denis will need to hear you. I can tell you whatever they say. //

//Very well. //

They entered the studio. The apprentice found his work from the night before. LaCroix seated himself by an easel.

//Do you remember, when I first brought you to the Gallery, you said that the other immortals felt like death? //

//I remember, // Jean Pierre nodded. *//I'm not sure I can explain it any better now than I could then. //*

//Do you still feel that way? And aloud, my friend. //

Jean Pierre sighed. "Well, maybe not death."

//What then? //

"...Weariness?"

The teacher nodded. *//Apathy. //*

"Apathy?" the young man repeated as if trying to remember the meaning of the word. "Indifference. Surely not," he protested.

//Indifference. Uninterest. It is much the same. //

"But why? There are so many things to do."

//You are very young, my friend. It's been less than a year for you in this Life. Most of those in the Gallery are much older. They have tasted life to the fullest. //

"Like you."

//Some, // LaCroix agreed.

"But none over four hundred years, you said."

//At the Gallery, you would be hard pressed to find anyone even close to three hundred. //

"And Lorraine?"

//The lady is actually younger than I am. //

"How? She taught you."

//She has been longer in the Life. But she was brought over at a much younger age. Seventeen. Younger even than Gabrielle, // said LaCroix.

"How old were you?"

//Twenty-eight. //

Jean Pierre digested that. "I hope it was easier for her than it was for you."

//It was, in some ways, at least. //

"How 'in some ways'?"

//Jean Pierre, we are somewhat diverging from the original topic. //

"What happened?" the young man insisted.

//She killed her master. Not quite the same way I killed mine, but the result was the same. //

"Do we... Do we always kill our masters?"

The teacher answered quickly, *//No. It does happen. But not always. //*

"Why?"

LaCroix smiled at the familiar intensity in the young man's face. *//Anger is usually a primary reason. Jealousy. Fear. //*

"Jealousy? Why?"

//Any number of reasons. You have something I want. You have someone I want. //

"And that's...what you think maybe happened to me?"

//It does seem like the best possibility, yes, // the older man agreed.

"Is that why there's no one over four hundred? We kill each other off?"

//It does happen. And sad to say, it is almost a common place occurrence, but, no, that is not the main reason. //

"What then?" Jean Pierre asked. "We have to be killed. By mortals?"

//That, too, happens. But at a much lower rate. We have, after all, many advantages over humans. //

"What does that leave? Acts of God?"

//What about acts of self-murder? //

LaCroix could feel the shock from across the room.

"Suicide?" the young man gasped. "You said... You said that you thought about it once."

The teacher studied his apprentice. *//More than once, //* he sent quietly.

"No!" Jean Pierre stretched out an arm.

//Stay there, // the older man instructed. *//This is not an emotional discussion. These are only facts, my friend. //*

The young man sat back down, wrapping his arms about himself. "But suicide. Why?"

//Despair. //

"But why?" Jean Pierre insisted. "You have everything."

//Not quite that, // LaCroix smiled. *//But I will admit to being more content in the last year than I have been in a very, long time. //*

"I...I understand despair," the apprentice nodded. "But why you?"

//I have never been blind, my friend. I have known no one to survive what you have. Hopelessness is all too common among beings, mortal or not. //

"Why despair?"

LaCroix thought a moment before answering. *//Your family were all dead by the time I took you in. You lost your home when your father died. You were living in poverty with your mother when I met you. And when she died.... //*

"I lost everything...until you found me."

//You had two days of desolation, and a week before that of watching your mother die. Imagine centuries of such isolation and seeing everything you know die. //

//I have lost my family, my home, my country. I have watched those around me grow old and feeble. I have had those I cared for turn against me, those I trusted try to kill me. //

//Before you came to live with me, the only constant in my life was Lorraine. //

The older man was startled when a light hand rested on his knee. He hadn't noticed his companion move to sit beside him.

"And you only see her once a year," the apprentice said.

//If that. //

"Because of blood. The blood that drew you together, keeps you apart."

LaCroix was silent.

"And still you keep trying."

//It's either that, or die. //

"And you and I," the young man asked, raising his hand to touch his master's arm. "What holds us together?"

The teacher studied the lean face turned toward his. *//I have no idea. I've never known anyone like you, Jean Pierre. You are good. Too good. Too generous. Too forgiving. //*

"And how many people have I killed? For a good man, I have a lot of blood on my hands. I wish I could see you. I wish..."

//There is no harm in wishing, my friend. If you're done with your questions, why don't you pose for me? //

"Pose? Me? Why? From what I saw of myself, I don't have anything I'd want to see."

//Then isn't it fortunate that you don't have to look? Get ready. //

Jean Pierre undressed. LaCroix observed with approval. Young skin was smooth and whole again. The teacher prepared his sketch board.

"Where do you want me?" the nude young man asked as he stood before the other.

//Right here. Where you were, // the older man said.

Jean Pierre sat at his teacher's feet and draped an arm over his clad leg.

//Rest your head. //

The young man put his cheek on his master's thigh.

//Now, // LaCroix sent as he began to draw.
The slim body sagged. Gently, the teacher laid his free hand on the wayward hair.
//You should warn them about me, // said Jean Pierre.
//Aloud, my friend. Warn who? //
"Gabrielle and Denis."
//Why? What are you intending to do? //
"I doubt... I doubt they have as strong a constitution as you do."
//But your body has healed. Can't you feel it? You are as beautiful as you ever were. //
"Except that I'm blind. And deaf."
Pause.
//Look at me, // LaCroix ordered.
The young man lifted his head to face his teacher. "I wish I...."
The older man silenced him with fingers on his mouth. LaCroix focused his thoughts and reached.
The agile mind was not buried so deep this time. Nor was it surrounded by walls of pain. For a moment, the teacher felt bright thoughts begin to encircle him.
Then suddenly he was alone, as the young man jerked away.
"No! ...Misha, no," Jean Pierre repeated more softly, as he hugged himself.
//Why? // the master asked. *//I was only going to— //*
"I know what you were going to do," the young man cut in rudely. "It almost killed you last time."
//You are much stronger now. There's no pain. I'm more prepared, myself, for that matter. And it wouldn't be for as long as— //
"Too long," Jean Pierre interrupted again.
LaCroix frowned. Was this to become a habit?
"Too long for you," the apprentice went on. "And never long enough for me."
//Come here, my friend, // the older man smiled, reaching for the bare shoulder.
//Please, // Jean Pierre begged, slipping into mind voice. *//I'm not that strong. I can't resist.... //*
//You're stronger than you know, // LaCroix countered, pulling the slight figure up into his arms.
//Don't you trust me? //
//Not enough to let you risk your life for me, // the young man sobbed against his shoulder.
//I think I'm offended, // LaCroix said, lightly into his hair.
//Don't be. If you die, what will happen to me then? //
The teacher nodded. *//Very practical. I approve. //*
//Promise you won't try it again. //
//No. //
//Please, Misha. //
//I will not promise. But I won't do it now. Is that acceptable? //
Wayward hair bobbed. *//I don't have to like it, do I? //* the young man said, holding on to his teacher tightly. *//Only accept it. //*
//Only that, // LaCroix agreed.
The older man found himself tracing the pattern of Jean Pierre's spine. The apprentice curved himself into the touch.
"You have good hands," the young man murmured aloud. "You have..."
LaCroix stopped himself from following the back bone to its end. Instead, his arm encircled the slim waist.
"...So good..." Jean Pierre whispered.
The teacher was contemplating the feel of shoulder blade and jutting pelvis beneath his hands, when he heard pounding below.
"What is it?" the young man asked moving back.

//Denis, I think,// LaCroix said, reluctantly releasing him.
Jean Pierre searched for his clothes. "I'll bring him up," he said, getting dressed.
//I'll go.//
"I can do it," the young man protested.
//I know you can. I have something for him to do.//
"Oh."
//You get to work. We'll be up shortly.//
The apprentice nodded as he located his unfinished statue.

* * *

The older man descended the stairs.
It was Denis. But he was alone. LaCroix was disinclined to ask why.
"How is he?" the male prostitute asked, as he entered.
"Jean Pierre? Fairly well at the moment."
"We got word that he'd been hurt."
"I received your message. Thank you for your concern." It only now occurred to LaCroix that he hadn't yet told Jean Pierre about it.
"What happened?" Denis asked.
"He was attacked. But the poison has been the biggest problem."
"Poison? How?"
The older man waved the answer away. "He can't see and he can't hear," he said instead.
"Oh, no."
"Yes. He's having some difficulty dealing with it."
"The poor kid," Denis shook his head. "Why did it happen?"
"I don't know," the teacher said calmly. "I will find out, however."
"And heaven help them."
"Heaven won't," LaCroix promised.
"I'd like to be there when you find them. If there's anything I can do...?"
"There is," the older man said, satisfied the way the conversation had gone. "I want you to seduce him."

"What?!"
The teacher pulled his attention from the dim presence above him to the lanky mortal before him.
"I thought you had excellent hearing. You will be well paid. In fact, if you succeed, you will be hired permanently to stay here."
"What do you mean, 'if'?" the prostitute bristled.
"Because Jean Pierre may well argue the point."
"Then why do it?"
"What he needs, I can't give him. You can."
"But he loves you."
"Yes. He does," the older man said calmly.
"He'd do anything for you. If it's release that he needs, why not let him find it with you? He won't argue with you."
"No. But that's not what he requires."
"But from me? Rather than you? I find that hard to believe."
"Believe what you like," LaCroix shrugged. "Just remember there is a difference between want

and need.”

Denis frowned.

“One thing more,” the teacher went on, “you will not couple with him. I will be watching. If you even attempt to take him, I will render you incapable of the act ever again.”

“And if he wants me?” the mortal challenged.

LaCroix hadn’t considered that possibility. “You will submit, of course,” he said with a lightness he didn’t feel. “I think you will find this seduction will take a certain amount of aggression. But don’t let your lust rule your judgement. Or do you deny that you want him?”

The prostitute glanced down, not quite to his knees. “I doubt I could persuade you of that, sir.”

“Good. Go, then. He’s on the fourth floor.”

The older man watched Denis mount the stairs and enter the studio, then followed him and remained by the door. Jean Pierre was working on his sculpture. Denis began by shedding his clothes. Smiling, he crossed the room.

The young man turned to face the newcomer. “Who is it?”

The prostitute touched his hand.

“Denis?”

The curly haired man stepped in close and put his arms around the apprentice.

“What is it? Are you all right?” The young man finally noticed the lack of clothing. “What are you...?”

Silently, Denis began to unbutton the silk shirt.

“Stop that,” said Jean Pierre irritably, batting the hands away.

The prostitute moved his attention to the apprentice’s trousers, passing a hand over the crotch.

“No!” the young man snapped, as he grabbed the wrist.

The mortal went wisely limp before bones could break. Jean Pierre recanted and released the man.

“I’m sorry,” the young man said, rubbing the bruised limb. “Just what are you trying to do?” He sighed. “As if I could hear you tell me. Go find LaCroix. He’ll tell me. Go on.”

The apprentice stepped back and started to refasten buttons. Then he found himself wrapped in a nude Denis. A bare leg circled his hips. Wiry arms embraced his shoulders.

“Are you out of your mind?” the young man barked out. He continued to protest and struggle, all while trying to not hurt the mortal.

LaCroix smiled as he watched. Then Denis began to nuzzle at his throat.

Jean Pierre gasped. “Don’t. Please!”

LaCroix stopped smiling.

Encouraged by the only positive response he had gotten so far, Denis continued mouthing the long neck.

LaCroix nodded. The prostitute had finally found the right track.

“Denis, you can’t...” the young man groaned.

The nude man laughed. Holding Jean Pierre’s head, Denis kissed him on the mouth. But the apprentice recoiled. Quickly, the prostitute went back to the sensitive throat.

“Please...” the young man sighed.

“Do me, then,” the libertine rasped, as he guided Jean Pierre’s face to his neck.

The young man brushed his lips over the offered jugular vein. For the first time, he began to hold the man wrapped around him.

“Yes,” Denis breathed.

“No,” the apprentice protested. “I can’t... You’ll...”

Jean Pierre licked the mortal’s throat. Denis rocked his hips against him. The young man attempted weakly to pull away.

The prostitute begged, “Please. I want...”

"No..." the apprentice sobbed, still trying to free himself.
The teacher stepped forward. *//Take him, //* he ordered.
Blind eyes searched for him. *//He'll die, //* came Jean Pierre's thought.
//I'll stop you before you kill him. You need him. //
//But— //

//Do it! //

Denis' rocking became a frantic thrusting.

//Now! //

Jean Pierre pierced the vein and drank. A scant second later, the prostitute stiffened and then sagged into strong arms.

LaCroix watched with satisfaction. He considered letting his apprentice simply drain the mortal. He had promised he wouldn't. But the young man's welfare far outweighed any trite forms of honor. Still, one of the few things that the master did value was Jean Pierre's trust. He touched the young man's arm, and was ignored. *//Let him go. //* With both hands, he gently tugged at the apprentice's hold.

Blue eyes looked up, unseeing.

//Release him, Jean Pierre. He has served his purpose. //

Jerking, the young man laid the mortal on the floor. He licked his lips and trembled. *//Is he all right? //* came the wavering thought.

LaCroix checked quickly. *//He'll live. //*

Stumbling, the apprentice went to a bench to get a blanket. Feeling his way, he covered the sprawling form. *//He is all right? //* he repeated.

//He will be, // the teacher shrugged. *//Tomorrow. The day after. //*

The young man nodded.

//He's yours now, // LaCroix sent, *//to feed from whenever you wish. //*

//Mine? //

//I assumed that was preferable to his being dead. //

//Yes. But what about Gabrielle? //

//He can still look after her. But his first priority is now you. //

Jean Pierre sighed. He picked up the bundled form and stood.

//What are you doing? // the teacher asked.

//Putting him to bed. I can take him to the patio house, if you'd rather. //

LaCroix frowned. *//Tomorrow is soon enough. Put him in the room off the kitchen. //*

//The servant's quarters. //

Slowly, the young man left the studio with his burden. The master followed at a distance. There were no mishaps. As soon as the apprentice came out of the small room alone, he found himself stopped and held as LaCroix examined him.

//You sent him to me, didn't you? // Jean Pierre asked.

//Did I? //

//He's never tried that before. //

//But not because he hasn't wanted to. He's lusted after you almost from the beginning. //

//Not quite. He was too busy trying to protect Gabrielle. Why him, and not Gabrielle, or one of Claudette's ladies? //

//I doubt that Gabrielle is a very accomplished seductress. Denis is someone we both know. Most of Claudette's working girls are new at the moment. I'm reluctant to let strangers into the house right now. I know you are curious about male sex. I thought I would indulge you. //

//You indulge me too much, // Jean Pierre sighed. *//It's quite a following I'm getting. First Shabot. And now Denis. //*

//I doubt that Denis will be flattered by the company. //

//I am flattered, I guess. I just don't understand it.//

//That isn't necessary. How do you feel?//

//Good. Very good. But tired, I think.//

//Then let's go to bed.//

Jean Pierre smiled, as they descended into the cellar. *//So much for feeling stronger. I didn't like sleeping alone. But then I never did. Maybe there is an advantage to all this after all.//*

//And that is?// the teacher asked, as he watched the young man undress.

//Being able to sleep with you so much. If I'm still blind in twenty years, will you still let me sleep with you?//

//Possibly.//

The apprentice grinned as he stretched. *//You have a weakness for vulnerable little boys, I think. It's something of a surprise.//*

//Not really.//

Jean Pierre crawled into bed and snuggled into his teacher's side. He reached up to touch the older man's face. *//I'll never draw you again,//* he sent sadly.

//Is that so terrible?//

//That I wanted to, yes.//

"Then perhaps we will think of an alternative," LaCroix said aloud.

//Perhaps,// the apprentice agreed sleepily.

The teacher was pleased.

*

*

*

LaCroix was awake only a few moments, before he felt the young man beside him become aware. Jean Pierre lifted himself up and then put his head on his teacher's chest.

"Am I breathing to your satisfaction?" LaCroix asked with a smile.

"Oh, yes," the young man grinned. "You breathe quite well."

"Thank you." The older man watched the younger prop himself up.

"So many things..." the apprentice said softly, as he listened. "That squirrel is still storing his nuts in here."

LaCroix shrugged. "He doesn't take much space."

"Denis is still asleep. Where is Gabrielle?"

"She didn't come with him."

"Why?"

"I didn't ask."

The young man nodded. "There's no one else in the house. ...Is there?"

The teacher checked and confirmed, "No. Only the three of us, all linked together."

"Like a chain."

"Where would you like to go tonight?"

"We should check on Denis."

LaCroix shrugged again. "If you wish."

"And then, anywhere," Jean Pierre grinned. "Everywhere."

"Done."

But first the older man needed to move his hand. It had started on his friend's shoulder, and then slid down his side to his waist. Now, it was becoming perilously close to finding a place cupping a slim buttock. LaCroix sighed. "Shall we get ready?"

"I never realized how much this house creaks," the young man nodded, as he sat up. "Is it that old?"

"All buildings make some kind of noise, even new ones, Jean Pierre."

The apprentice got dressed. Then he went to the wash basin to clean up. The master tended to himself, all the while keeping watch.

In the servant's quarters, they found the mortal still sleeping. Light fingers felt his face.

"Did I take too much?" Jean Pierre asked.

"Since you can hear at last, I would say that you took just enough."

"I mean for him."

"Perhaps. But he will live. That's what you wanted."

"I'm kind of surprised that you stopped me."

"So am I. Shall we go?"

"I want to get some of that cheese for him. And leave a note. Can he read?"

"Yes, he can, surprisingly enough."

"Good."

LaCroix watched his young friend hustle and bang. Sometimes intentionally. Sometimes not.

Then they donned cloaks and hats and Jean Pierre grasped his walking stick, and they summoned a carriage.

They went to a concert, where they settled themselves on the grass and became immersed in the music. Or rather, Jean Pierre became immersed. The teacher spent most of his time observing his happy young friend.

"Can we come again tomorrow?" the apprentice asked, during an intermission.

"We'll decide tomorrow. Why don't you listen to the people around us for a while?"

But the young man was already doing just that. The narrow face glowed, as it had not since the attack.

"What is it?" the teacher asked.

"A young mother is trying to convince her daughter that the music is beautiful. The little one would rather go home and play with her dolls."

"Some things never change. Any more than that does."

Jean Pierre turned his head, listening. "What?"

"To your right. A few hundred yards."

The young man centered in. Then he frowned. "What is it? Is someone hurt?" he asked.

"They're making love, Jean Pierre."

"Are you sure? They sound like they're in pain."

"I'm sure. Listen."

A few minutes passed in concentration.

"I guess I never realized that's what it sounded like," the young man frowned.

"Possibly because you enjoy participating, rather than viewing the act."

"Maybe," the apprentice shook his head.

The music began again. When the concert was over, the two men remained seated while the people milled about them.

"Do you wish to go home now?" the master asked.

"Not yet."

"Where, then?"

"A cafe?"

"Very well," LaCroix said, getting to his feet.

"Can we come here when there's no concert and listen to the frogs and crickets, maybe?" The young man got up.

"Of course."

"I came here a few times with Jeanette. But my attention was elsewhere."

"A very pleasant elsewhere, I'm sure," the older man said.

They walked most of the way before they located a free carriage. In short order they found themselves in a crowded restaurant. LaCroix did not much care for the limitations of movement caused by the packed humans, or the din they made. But his young friend seemed quite happy to be surrounded by noise and bodies.

The older man frowned in distaste as yet another set of hands groped him. When the persistent fingers got more familiar than was warranted, LaCroix latched onto a thin arm. A yank brought the attached body into view.

"Are you that hungry?" the older man asked a small face with saucered eyes and hollowed cheeks.

"Huh?"

"You're willing to risk a broken arm. Or are you only giving a sample of your talents?"

"I'm a thief, not a whore!"

"At least a whore gives something for the money. You give nothing."

//Misha?//

"What?" LaCroix asked aloud, not seeing his friend.

"What's the matter with you?" the kid asked. "You crazy or somethin'?"

//Are you all right?// the mind voice continued.

//Of course. Where are you?//

//I thought I felt something. You're safe?//

//Safe enough. What about you?//

//I'm dancing.//

The teacher smiled, still aware of the squirming urchin in his grasp. //Then enjoy, my friend. I'll check on you later.// LaCroix turned his attention back to his captive. "Now, then. What to do with you."

"Lemme go."

"That might be best."

A skeptical eye glared at the master through stringy hair. "Then do it!"

"I'm considering it. You smell. You have fleas. And you're too skinny to kill."

The young thief wouldn't make even a passable taste for the older man. He certainly wouldn't be enough for Jean Pierre's needs. In fact, the thinness and putrid smell could well be due to disease. His young friend certainly didn't need any other burdens.

"What's your name?" the teacher asked.

"Wha'cha wanna know for?"

"I'm vaguely curious as to your sex."

"I'm whatever you don't want."

"Practical enough, I suppose. Tell me, would you be interested in a job?"

"What kind of job?"

LaCroix smiled. "Nothing that would dirty your hands, I assure you. Delivering a message."

"How much?"

"A coin or two."

"I can make a coin or two right here," the thief said belligerently.

"Ah, but only if I let you go. And in one piece." LaCroix's smile widened. "Very well. I'm in a good mood at the moment. One should humor one's own good moods now and again."

He release the urchin. The child darted into the crowd. The teacher centered his attention on the small figure for a moment, noting that it stopped behind a corner and panted.

Not suitable at all.

He went to look for Jean Pierre. The young man was soon located. LaCroix watched as the apprentice and his companion withdrew to another room.

The teacher nodded. He wouldn't have minded a similar encounter of his own. He hadn't fed in several days. He wasn't quite hungry, but a little sustenance would not go amiss. However, a frail shadow seemed to be following him. LaCroix waited.

When Jean Pierre emerged from the room alone, he closed the door behind him. Then he turned toward his silent master and seemed to stare at him.

No, the eyes were too wide and unblinking. *Not yet.* "So. Can you tell it's me?" the teacher asked.

"I think so. But I think I may be losing that other awareness. Although I don't guess this is the best place to tell."

"Probably not. But it could very well be true. As your other senses return, you lose your need for it." LaCroix fought the urge to touch the long throat. The thief was still watching.

"I'd forgotten how many sounds there are," Jean Pierre said finally. "Voices, music, laughter. It's not so lonely now." He sighed. "If it hadn't been for you..."

"Enough," the older man silenced him, putting his hand on the slim shoulder.

The apprentice turned his head, not toward LaCroix, but toward the bend in the hall.

"Who is it?" the young man asked.

"A thief, not a whore."

"What?"

The master called out, "Have you changed your mind, then?"

The urchin stepped out into view. "A couple of coins, you said?"

"I said 'a coin or two'."

"Wha' cha want?"

"Deliver a message to Gabrielle and Claudette."

"Two people should mean two coins," the thief reasoned.

"We'll decide that when you accomplish the task. Tell them that Denis is all right and with LaCroix."

"That it?"

"I believe so, yes."

"You talkin' about the Claudette that runs the fancy house?" the thief asked.

"Yes."

"An' ain't Denis one of her boys?"

"Just deliver the message, Puce."

"Puce?" Jean Pierre cut in. "Surely that's not your name."

"It's Maurice," the thief said with a flair.

"Maurice?" the young man smiled. "How about Michele?"

"You think it's a girl?" LaCroix asked surprised.

"Isn't she?"

"I can't tell."

"I ain't no stinking girl!" the child screamed.

"The stinking is definitely accurate," the teacher commented.

"There's nothing wrong with girls," said Jean Pierre. "Where would boys be without them?"

"Probably playin' with other boys, like you two."

The young man sighed. "Does everybody think we're lovers but us?"

The master shrugged.

The thief smirked. "Who you think you're foolin', anyway?"

"Only those who want to be fooled, I guess," Jean Pierre shook his head.

"Claudette gonna pay me?" Puce asked.

"Yes. Tell her to give you two kopeks."

"What's that?"

"Deliver the message and you'll find out. Now go."

Jean Pierre had shifted his grasp on his walking stick. The small thief stared at the brass handle. LaCroix shook his head with a jerk.

"What is it?" the apprentice asked.

"I believe I said something about keeping the handle covered when out in public," said the older man.

"Oh." Jean Pierre moved his hands back to their blanketing position.

"What's the matter with you?" Puce asked, staring at the young man.

"Nothing that two good eyes wouldn't cure," Jean Pierre said with forced lightness.

"A blind whore. That's kinda funny, ain't it?"

"No more so," said LaCroix slowly, "than a thief without a tongue."

"You gotta catch me first," the youngster taunted.

"Would you care to try to get away?" the teacher asked softly.

"No," the apprentice said, reaching out a hand to touch his master's arm. Then to the urchin, "You'd better go. Now," he ordered.

The thief studied them both for a moment, then darted away. LaCroix was seriously tempted to go after him. Evidently, the intent was communicated to his young friend because the grip tightened.

"Let him go?"

"You shouldn't encourage riff-raff, Jean Pierre."

"You encourage me."

"You have never been like that one. In fact, you are like no one else at all."

"And now I'm even more so," the young man sighed. But he went on, "We should go home so I can check on Denis."

"If you want, you can check on him from here."

"The way you do with Shabot?"

"To some extent, yes."

"I'd rather see him—go there," Jean Pierre corrected himself quickly.

The teacher nodded. He had caught himself several times using that word.

"Can we fly?" the apprentice asked.

"We can try."

"But I can't see where I'm going."

"We'll just have to go at a more leisurely pace, then. And you'll have to trust me to guide you," LaCroix smiled.

An answering smile changed to a puzzled frown. "Speaking of trust," said the young man, holding out his cane. "Just what is this?"

"A walking stick."

"You know what I mean. I can't make out the design. And I'm getting tired of the reactions to it when I don't know the reason."

"It's a man and woman engaged in intercourse."

"Well, it almost had to be something like that, didn't it? Show me," Jean Pierre asked, holding out his hand.

The teacher guided young fingers over brass. "The woman's back. Her rump. Her legs."

Jean Pierre nodded. "And this is her hair, then."

"Yes."

"But what is this?"

"The man's arm."

"His arm?"

"His sleeve more accurately," LaCroix shrugged.

"His sleeve. Meaning the man is dressed and the woman is not."

"Yes."

"A man designed this thing, didn't he?"

"Probably," the older man smiled.

The apprentice shook his head. "Let's go home. I think I'm tired."

"Very well."

They walked outside and into a deserted alley. The young man could fly now, but LaCroix couldn't help but notice the lack of enthusiasm his friend displayed. Jean Pierre's hand never left his teacher's arm the entire flight. They touched down on the roof of the older man's home.

"It's not the same," the apprentice sighed.

"No," LaCroix agreed. "But it is all coming back."

The young man led the way into the house and down the stairs. They found Denis asleep in the kitchen.

"He's dressed," Jean Pierre said, picking him up in his arms and walking back to the bedroom.

"Even prostitutes wear clothes occasionally. What's more important, he's eaten."

"Good," the young man said, as he lay the mortal on the bed.

"And apparently, he was writing a note for Gabrielle."

"It's a good thing you sent word to her...and Claudette."

LaCroix watched his young friend touch the sleeping man's face and then his throat.

"Our pulse is much slower, isn't it?" the apprentice noted.

"Yes, and our breathing not as deep. Come."

Jean Pierre stood and followed his teacher down some more steps. In the cellar, they prepared for bed.

"I need to do something about Gabrielle," said the young man as he undressed.

"If you are concerned about her, yes."

"She must be going crazy wondering what's happened to him."

"Possibly." The teacher positioned himself on the bed.

"Will Denis be well enough tomorrow to go get her?"

"He should be, yes. But your promise still stands. She will not come into this house, or yours, unless you take her."

"That's not what you did about Denis."

"I was reasonably sure the situation would take care of itself," the master shrugged.

"And if I hadn't?" the nude young man sat on the edge of the mattress.

"I was prepared to help."

"Were you?"

"Of course."

Jean Pierre frowned.

"What is it?" the older man asked.

"I still forget. I find myself trying to focus on things I can't see."

"It will be all right."

"You can't know that."

"But I can," LaCroix said. "You're alive, and you're well, and you're here. That is quite enough for me."

"I'm greedy, then?" Jean Pierre murmured, lying down.

"Not that," LaCroix answered, then brought the conversation back to the previous topic. "So, what

of Gabrielle?"

"You could do it."

"I could," the teacher agreed, putting a familiar arm around bare shoulders. "But it would be easier for her, and Denis, if it was you."

"Why?"

"Because if I take her, it could be a case of serving two masters. Since they are emotionally linked, even possibly lovers, the different masters could be an added strain for them."

"Do you think they are? Lovers, I mean."

"I haven't attempted to find out. But it does seem reasonable. Does it bother you?"

"Why?"

"If you can ask that, there's no reason. Sleep now. You were tired."

"I know. I remember..."

The young man was gone. LaCroix smiled, as sleep took him as well.

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The teacher had been awake several minutes when he felt his apprentice begin to move. The young man sat up. LaCroix's hand took its familiar path from shoulder to hip. But this time, the teacher kept his fingers resting on the tip of the narrow pelvis.

Jean Pierre paid no attention as he traced the older man's face, then his throat. "You're awake," the young man smiled.

"Am I?" the master said without moving.

"I'd like—" the apprentice began and then wavered.

"What would you like?" LaCroix asked.

"I want to try to go out by myself tonight."

No. "Why?" the older man asked calmly.

"Because I think I can do it," Jean Pierre said quickly. "The hearing helps a lot, a lot more than I thought."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"And I think I'll talk myself out of it if I wait. I don't mean to go very far or for very long. Just to the stables. I can even take a carriage."

"You will take a carriage."

"Okay," the young man said, swinging off the bed.

"I don't like this, Jean Pierre," said the teacher, as he watched him dress. "It's too soon. It's only been a week."

"I know. A week and I'm still blind. I need to adapt and I haven't. I don't want to. But... I know you think I'll see again. But even you can't be sure. I have to..." The apprentice took a deep breath. "I want to try."

LaCroix fought the overwhelming urge to stop this. His young friend was right, of course. But—

"Very well," the teacher said aloud.

"And I want to talk to Denis about bringing Gabrielle."

The older man nodded. Jean Pierre hesitated.

"You'd better get busy," LaCroix said gently. "You have several things to do tonight."

"Right," the apprentice said, as he set off.

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The teacher looked on as the young man talked to the new servant and sent him out. Then Jean Pierre set about preparing himself to leave the house.

"I think I'm ready," the young man announced.

LaCroix could find no fault with his appearance or his intent. He was tempted to make some excuse, but held to his silence.

"Now, all I need is a carriage," said Jean Pierre.

"That has already been taken care of. Shabot will bring it."

"Poor Shabot. It's been almost ten days since you've seen him. Hasn't it?"

"Close enough," the teacher shrugged.

"What do you think of him?" the apprentice asked.

"I don't."

"You have to feel something."

"Why?"

"Because you took him. You chose him, if not to be immortal, to at least be close to you."

"Not really," LaCroix said. "I took him that first time because I was angry. It was only his good fortune that I had fed earlier that night that he's still alive. He's an irritant. And he's more than efficient at it. The only reason he hasn't died yet is that he serves a purpose, like bringing the carriage tonight. But if he wasn't here, we'd manage."

"You said something once about having a woman servant, 'beautiful and buxom'. And yet...?"

"There have been such," the older man said. "More than a few, in fact. It is just that at the moment, I have only Shabot."

"And me. Such as I am."

"You are more than enough, my friend. And there is more than that difference between you."

"What about Claudette?"

"Claudette uses her skills best where she is."

"Are there others like her?"

The teacher shrugged, "A few."

"But there's only me...like me?"

"Only you."

"I'm sorry."

LaCroix shook his head. "Don't be." He touched the young man's throat.

"It's not fair to you," said Jean Pierre.

"I'll decide what's fair."

The young man locked his hands around his master's wrist. "It scares me."

"I know."

"Will it ever stop?"

"Given time, it will. Time is the cure for most things. Most."

"An eternity of darkness.' It keeps running through my head," Jean Pierre shuddered. "Over and over again. Last night, I forgot for a little while. But—"

"Blindness would be difficult to forget for long."

"Sometimes I think that if I..."

A pounding sound.

"Shabot," the teacher sighed. "He also has an impeccable sense of timing."

"The carriage." The young man straightened and turned away.

"Jean Pierre, it will work out."

"It has to, doesn't it? I've...got to go."

LaCroix followed him to the front door. Shabot was there as expected. He and the apprentice mumbled something at each other. The older man signaled for the mortal's silence. Then he resettled the

young man's cloak.

"Don't worry," Jean Pierre whispered as he went outside.

"Of course," said the master, not meaning it at all.

He watched the slim figure climb into the waiting cab. The driver snapped the door shut and got into his own place before they drove off.

"How is he?" Shabot asked from behind him.

"Go to the studio and clean it up," said LaCroix curtly, as he took up his own cloak and hat. The older man hurried to a nearby alley and took flight. After all, he hadn't said he wouldn't follow.

It took him only a moment to locate the right carriage, and that mostly from direction than anything else. Some finely tuned sensing confirmed Jean Pierre's presence there. The teacher kept his distance watching, waiting.

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He arrived home a scarce few seconds before his apprentice returned.

"I have to pay the driver," the young man greeted. "I forgot about money."

"Give him this," LaCroix said, putting two coins in his hand.

Jean Pierre went back through the front door, and then soon reappeared again. "I'm sorry. I didn't think," the apprentice said.

"Why didn't you use the money in your pocket?"

"What money?"

"There," the teacher said, patiently tapping the fold of material at his hip.

"Oh. I forgot I had it."

"Why else did I insist that you carry it?"

"So I would have some money if I ever needed it," Jean Pierre remembered. "I never needed it before."

"Next time, then," the older man shrugged. "Denis hasn't brought Gabrielle yet."

"I told him to bring her to the patio house."

"Why?"

"I wanted to dance with her in the ballroom." The ballroom with its crystal lights and mirrored walls. "I don't guess it really matters now," the young man added.

"Of course, it does," said LaCroix. "You know what's there, even if you can't see it. Shall we go? Or they will be there before us."

So, still dressed in cloaks and hats, they climbed the stairs. They flew from one home to the other. Jean Pierre sighed.

Not the same. The teacher nodded somberly.

"Did you follow me?" the apprentice asked suddenly.

The question startled the older man. He took a few seconds to identify the reference and then decide whether or not to admit the truth. "Yes," he said finally. "I saw you fall."

"When?"

"When you alit from the cab. I saw the driver help you up."

"Yes," Jean Pierre said, bald and uninformative.

Inside, the two men found Gabrielle and Denis waiting for them.

"How are you?" the girl asked.

"Much better, thank you."

"You can hear me? Denis said that you were deaf, too."

"I seem to be improving."

"Denis," LaCroix said. "Come with me."

"Sir?" Confusion crossed the man's face as he looked from one to the other.

"Jean Pierre," said the master. "Don't you think Denis should be preparing his room?"

"Yes. Do. Whatever room you want, except mine."

"You want me to live here?" Denis questioned.

"Don't you want to?" the young man countered.

"I...don't..."

"Would you like to stay with him, Gabrielle?" the apprentice asked.

"Rather than stay at Claudette's alone? Yes."

"Good. All right, Denis?"

"Yes, sir. I just didn't think that you'd want me to really live here. I'm a.... I mean, I was.... I mean, I..."

"And now you aren't," the young man smiled. "We'll be fine."

"Sir?" Gabrielle asked hesitantly. "What will you expect of me?"

"That you take care of the house, with Denis."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?" Jean Pierre asked. He reached out and touched her arm. She flinched.

"Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you." Her anxiety became clear. "Oh, is that it? No, I don't want your sexual favors, Gabrielle."

"Sir?"

"I thought we were friends."

"But..."

LaCroix signaled Denis. "Come," he ordered softly.

Reluctantly, Denis followed. The master went to the second floor and opened a door.

"You may have this room or the servant's quarters," the older man announced. "The choice is yours, but only because Jean Pierre wishes for you to have a choice."

"Thank you, sir," said the other quietly. "Did he mean what he said about Gabrielle?"

"What? That he didn't want her as a bed companion? Probably. He isn't a very accomplished liar as yet. Are you jealous?"

"No, sir. Of course not."

"Answer me," LaCroix ordered sharply. "Are you lovers, then?"

"No, sir," the mortal said miserably. "She's terrified of sex. She'll sleep in the same room with me. But when I try to make love to her, she screams."

"It's been burned out of her, then."

"Yes, sir. She hasn't told me all of it, but yes."

"Very well. I have no desire to hear the gruesome details of her deflowering. Prepare the room. You can see about moving your possessions from Claudette's come daylight. Jean Pierre's room is on the next floor up. He will discuss with you the maintenance he will expect of you. My room is in the cellar of this house. Whether I am here or not, you will not enter that room. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Remember this: you belong to him now, both of you. Not only does that mean that you will do any and all things he may require of you, but it also means that he is in your charge. You will protect him with your lives."

"Yes, sir," the man whispered.

"He's coming now," LaCroix said. "Prepare the bed."

Nervously, the mortal complied.

After a few moments, Jean Pierre appeared with a limp Gabrielle in his arms.

"Is she all right?" Denis asked with a nervous glance at the teacher.

"Yes," said the young man. "I was very careful. Where's the bed? I don't remember the layout of the room."

"Five steps ahead and then two to your right," said the master.

The apprentice followed the directions and laid the young woman on the blanket. LaCroix looked her over and briefly touched her throat.

"Take care of her, Denis," the young man said. "I don't know what kind of food there is in the house. If you need to get any, there should be some money in the chest in the main hall."

"Be sure not to take too much," the teacher warned.

Denis nodded.

"Don't worry," said the apprentice. "She did want to be here."

"I know," the former prostitute said.

"Come, Jean Pierre," said the master, drawing him away. "Leave them to their settlings."

On their way down to the cellar, the young man asked, "She is okay, isn't she?"

"She is fine. You barely took enough, if the truth be told."

"But it was enough."

"Yes."

The young man nodded.

In the master's room, LaCroix watched his young friend get ready for bed.

"Did something happen in the stable?" he asked suddenly. He'd waited outside.

"Nothing important."

"Did you fall again?"

"Why do you ask?"

"When I said something about it before, you asked 'when?' Highly questionable if you only fell the one time."

Jean Pierre nodded as he sat on the bed.

"Tell me," said the older man, lifting his chin.

The apprenticed gave a small smile. "I don't think it works if I can't see you."

"You think not?" Long fingers reached toward the young man's temple.

"No," Jean Pierre shook his head, taking hold of his master's hand. "I'll tell you. There was someone inside the stable."

"Who?"

"A groom. At least, I think I remember the voice from before. He tripped me."

"Intentionally?"

"Oh, yes."

"And what did you do?" LaCroix asked.

"I got angry."

"And?" the older man asked patiently.

The apprentice sighed. "He's going to be very uncomfortable when he wakes up."

"Good."

"He really enjoyed it, seeing me crawl around."

"There are idiots everywhere."

LaCroix got himself ready and then lay down. The young man nestled close to his side.

"Is cruelty just the order of things," he asked, "only I never realized it before?"

"If you weren't aware of it, then I would say not," said the teacher. "That is your order. For myself, I see cruelty and stupidity almost every day. That is my order."

"Um."

"True enough. Sleep now."

* * *

Days passed. Jean Pierre grew stronger. His senses—in particular, his hearing—became quite sharp even for one of the Blood. But his sight remained elusive. Even though they made nightly trips among the clubs of Paris, the young man remained shrouded in darkness, both physically and emotionally.

Most of the time, he seemed to almost accept the new conditions of his life. Then sometime during their incessant talks, LaCroix would become aware of his apprentice's ever-present grief. The young man became more proficient at sculpture. And while that outlet for his creative talents did help, the underlying misery remained.

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LaCroix left Gabrielle in the kitchen. She had been a strangely brave Gabrielle, confronting him even while she trembled. Her words still echoed in his brain.

"How can you do that to him," she had said, "when he loves you so?"

Loves me? Then why does he want to leave me? his answer raged back.

He mounted the stairs. The teacher could hear Jean Pierre talking to Denis even before he reached the fourth floor. In the studio, the older man found his apprentice working on yet another figure study. The new manservant sat close by.

Too close.

Control.

"I don't know how it works," Jean Pierre was saying, "but only blood seems to help."

Denis saw the master standing in the doorway. It startled him. He put an hand on his young master's arm.

"What?" the apprentice asked. Then the young man turned toward the entrance to the room. "LaCroix?" he called out.

"Denis," the older man said curtly. "Get out."

"Yes, sir," the mortal said, scurrying away with a backward glance at his new master.

The apprentice got to his feet, revealing that although he was dressed, he was barefoot. "What is it?" he asked, as if he felt the anger the older man was struggling to keep under control.

"You spend quite a bit of time talking to Denis," the teacher said with some degree of normalcy in his voice.

"I like him."

"And do you find his tales of debauchery of interest?"

"A little," the young man said. "They're also horrifying."

"Is that why you haven't yet gone to any of the bordels he's told you about to see if they'd accept you as a whore?"

"Wha...?"

"Take off your clothes," LaCroix cut in.

Perplexed but unquestioning, the apprentice began to unbutton his shirt.

"Only your trousers," the teacher hissed.

The young man frowned, but undid his belt. When his breeches were fallen around his ankles, he stepped clear.

"And there they are," the older man gritted out.

"What?"

"I wanted to see again what you seem to be so willing to sell."

"I don't understand."

"Then we're agreed. You should have told me, Jean Pierre. I, possibly, would have made you some kind of offer."

"But I—"

"Don't you have any idea of what that kind of life entails?"

"I only wanted to know—"

"Know what?! What this feels like?" LaCroix spat out as he took hold of his apprentice's most vulnerable anatomy, his nails biting into the tender flesh.

Jean Pierre gasped.

"Is this what you want?" the teacher demanded. "For some imbecile to have the right to maul you because he has a few coins in his pocket?"

"No. I..."

"Are you so anxious to leave me that you're willing to go voluntarily into that kind of life?"

The teacher jerked his hand away. Turning, he fought to keep close rein on the rage that was threatening to consume him.

The young man remained trembling in the middle of the room. "Did...did Denis also tell you..." he shuddered, "that he...didn't think any house...would take me?"

"It wasn't Denis who told me," LaCroix hissed. "But a righteously indignant Gabrielle, who was appalled that I would throw you out, much less give you to Claudette."

"I never said that," Jean Pierre pleaded. "I swear I never..."

"Silence!"

The apprentice clenched his jaw, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Cover yourself," the teacher snarled.

Still shaking, the young man pulled on his clothes.

"Denis!"

The new servant appeared almost immediately. He'd been listening. But LaCroix had no time for minor distractions. His whole attention was on the young man with the balled fists, awaiting his sentence.

"Take him to the patio house," the master ordered.

"Sir?"

"Put him to bed. Perhaps you can expand the lessons he seems so avid to learn."

"Sir, I've never..." Denis attempted to say.

"Now!" the teacher said with cold finality.

Jean Pierre turned and stumbled toward the door. The mortal gaped at the older man for a half second. Then he went to his young master, putting an arm around the quivering shoulders. LaCroix stood still only long enough to watch them leave the room.

Then he picked up his apprentice's unfinished statue and threw it into the farthest wall. Grinding his teeth, he mounted the stairs to the roof and pushed himself into the air. He rocketed through the night sky straight up for several miles before letting himself fall to a more reasonable height of fifty feet or so above the city roof tops.

It was probably his subconscious working, but he found himself following the progress of a certain cab. It became particularly interesting when its route abruptly veered to another direction. LaCroix didn't send out any questing thought to confirm his suspicions of the occupants. He followed.

The carriage went to the gates of a familiar cemetery. Far below him, the teacher watched Jean Pierre descend from the vehicle. Then the young man sent it, and Denis, on their way with a firm wave of his hand.

LaCroix came to ground in time to hear the servant protesting as the carriage disappeared around a corner. He saw his apprentice making his way among the tombstones. Keeping his shields about him, the

older man followed. But he knew where the other was going.

The blind young man found his way to a near barren stretch of ground well beyond the ornate family markers. He searched and finally found a pile of small stones. Jean Pierre sat on the sparse grass and began to rock back and forth.

The teacher was content to wait. He watched the slim body grow still at last and the sobbing cease. *Good.* The dawn was coming. They had perhaps a half hour to find shelter.

The young man got to his feet. Taking off his clothes, he then laid down on top of his cloak as if to sleep.

Puzzled, LaCroix waited. His apprentice made no other preparation to move. Precious minutes passed.

"What are you doing?" the older man asked.

Blue eyes opened for only a moment. Then they closed again.

"Enough of this foolishness. We haven't much time."

Still the young man didn't move.

LaCroix knelt down beside him. He touched a bare shoulder. "Come."

The apprentice only moaned and turned his face into his arm.

"Jean Pierre, we have to get out of here."

"No."

The sky was growing light.

"Now, Jean Pierre."

"No."

With that, the teacher enfolded the edges of the cloak around the nude figure and picked him up. *Where?* He saw a small tomb and headed there. The young man struggled in his arms.

"Be still."

But the apprentice only stopped moving when the older man put him down again.

LaCroix heaved at the stone that sealed the squat building. Once inside he flung the coffin aside. The teacher swept wood, corpse and cloth to a far corner. The stench was abysmal and the room cramped and low. But it was dark.

LaCroix hauled his apprentice inward. The young man tried to escape, but the master only shoved him behind. The older man pulled the stone back in place. When he felt his apprentice scrambling past him, LaCroix wrapped the squirming figure in his own arms and legs. The teacher ended up braced between the opposite walls of the crypt, with Jean Pierre's body swaddled between his knees.

"Sleep," he whispered.

"You should have let me die," the young man sobbed into his chest.

"It's my decision. You have to live with it. Now sleep."

Sleep didn't come easily for either of them. The apprentice only seemed to doze periodically from exhaustion. LaCroix was aware of his every move.

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It was almost dark outside when Jean Pierre began to wake fully. The teacher kept himself motionless while he felt the young man sit up. Hesitant fingers explored the positioning of his master's body. LaCroix endured it all, stoically. But when he sensed the apprentice attempt to move away, the teacher tightened his arms.

"Stay a moment."

Jean Pierre lowered his head and body in silence.

The older man asked, "Are you finished with this stupidity or will I have to put a guard on you?"

"I'm finished with it," came a quiet voice, "for as long as you care to stop me."

LaCroix buried his hand in his young friend's hair. "Jean Pierre, why do you think I was angry?"

"Because you wouldn't have chosen a whore."

"Whoredom is not the issue," the master said softly into the crown of the apprentice's head. "I have no wish to lose you. ...Just yet."

Jean Pierre nodded against his breast.

"Let's go home," LaCroix offered.

"Please."

A kick sent the door flying. The two men crawled into the night air.

"We're still in the cemetery," said the apprentice said, inhaling deeply.

"Yes."

"Then what is this place?" The young man reached back to touch cold marble. "A mausoleum?" he asked.

"Yes," said LaCroix again as he returned the stone door.

"So that's what that smell was."

"It served the purpose. Come." The teacher climbed the low hill. The young man came behind.

"It would seem that someone has taken your clothes," said the older man. "You'll have to travel dishabille."

Jean Pierre shrugged underneath the cloak. "It's still better than the nightshirt," he said.

"Only if you keep it wrapped about you."

The apprentice nodded.

"It's a good place," LaCroix said, looking around. "Your mother would be pleased."

"A pauper's grave is hardly an honor," the young man said quietly.

"Then she would be pleased that you visit her so often. Although I doubt she'd be happy about your reason for coming this time."

Jean Pierre only shook his head.

"How do you feel?"

"Tired," the young man said quietly.

"That's not surprising considering our sleeping conditions. Shall we go?"

The apprentice slowly bobbed his head.

"Now," the older man said, resting his hand on Jean Pierre's shoulder.

The two men left the ground. They returned to LaCroix's home. The teacher led the other down to his room. The young man stumbled toward his bed.

"Why did Denis think a brothel wouldn't take you?" LaCroix asked as he took the cloak.

"Because I'm impotent," came the quiet voice as Jean Pierre plowed into the bedcovers. "A prostitute is supposed to at least look like he enjoys his work."

The apprentice's last words were almost lost in the pillow and fast approaching sleep. The older man studied the oblivious figure. He heard Denis enter the room behind him.

"I was wrong," said the servant.

"Were you?" LaCroix said, pulling up the sheet to cover his nude friend.

"Who wouldn't want him?"

The teacher turned to face the mortal. "I have something for you to do," he said.

They left the room.

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The next evening, Jean Pierre came down to the main salon while LaCroix was talking to a small thief. The young man stood in the doorway. The teacher dismissed the child.

"Maurice?" Jean Pierre asked.

"Yeah," the thief spoke up. "How'd ya know? You c'n see now?"

"No. But I can hear."

"Go," the older man ordered.

"Gotta go," the thief said as he ran out.

"Adieu," the apprentice called after him.

LaCroix waited until he heard the front door shut behind the visitor. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Much better. Is he running errands for you?"

"Yes."

Pause.

Jean Pierre began to back out of the room.

"Come here," said the teacher.

The young man obeyed.

"Sit."

The apprentice sat in a nearby chair.

"Do you want to live with Claudette?" LaCroix asked softly.

Jean Pierre shook his head.

"I'm not saying that I will allow you to go. But is it what you truly want?"

"...No."

"Then why ask Denis about it? Curiosity?"

The young man seemed to study the floor. "Partly," he admitted.

"Tell me."

"It's not fair to you."

The teacher took a deep breath. He had told himself he would discuss this calmly. He didn't want a repeat of yesterday's fiasco. But then, he had no intention of releasing his apprentice, either. "What isn't fair to me?"

"For you to take care of me, tend me. I have no skills, no trade. I couldn't think of anything else I could do. A blind thief is almost as ludicrous as a blind painter."

"What about the sculpture?"

"I don't have the same...skills there. I have a long way to go to develop them."

"But you are developing them," LaCroix said.

"It's still not fair to you."

"I'll make that decision." LaCroix studied his apprentice. "Have you indulged yourself with Denis, then?"

"No. He's told me about it, what it's like. And I have seen the way it's done. But, no." The apprentice frowned suddenly. "You're looking for them."

"What? Who?" the older man asked, momentarily confused.

"The ones who...who did this to me. That's why the girl...why Maurice was here."

"You still think Puce is a girl?"

"That doesn't matter," Jean Pierre shook his head. "But it is why, isn't it?"

"Your intuition always amazes me, Jean Pierre."

"Isn't it?"

The teacher sighed. "Yes."

"Have you found them?"

"Not yet."

"I want to talk to them."

"Talk?" LaCroix questioned.

"I want to know why."

"So do I."

"Misha, please.... I don't want anyone else to die."

"I have every intention of discovering 'why' before I kill them."

"Let me take care of it?"

"No."

"Vengeance is mine...says the Lord."

"And 'I will repay,'" LaCroix countered.

Jean Pierre shook his head. "What if they go after you?"

"Good. Then I'll find them that much sooner."

The young man sighed in resignation.

The teacher smiled.

"Will you let me talk to them?" the apprentice asked.

"I will not promise. But I will make an effort."

Jean Pierre seemed to grimace.

"What is it?"

"Nothing important," the young man shrugged.

"Jean Pierre," LaCroix reproved.

"I ache a little, that's all."

"Where?"

"My head."

"Specifically."

The apprentice sighed. "Behind my eyes."

The teacher went to him and lifted the narrow chin. "How bad?" he asked.

"Not very. Nothing like what it was in the beginning."

Not kill them? No, not right away. First he'd mount them to a wall with wooden nails. Then he'd peel their skin away. "For how long?" the older man asked.

"A few days. ...Since Sunday." It was now Thursday.

Then I'll break every bone— "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I knew it would only worry you. There's nothing you can do that you haven't already done."

Even knowing it was true didn't make it any easier to accept. "Is that why this business with Denis?" the master demanded.

Jean Pierre shrugged again. "Maybe a little."

I'll spear every organ: the liver, both lungs, the spleen— "Are you still tired?"

"A little."

"Very well."

"But I think..." the young man began.

LaCroix waited.

"I think I should go out."

"I tend to agree. Not that I mean to belabor the point, but why?"

"I...I usually feel better after I feed."

"This has happened before?" the teacher asked sharply.

"Once or twice."

And the spearing will begin with the eyes— "Let's go, then," LaCroix said calmly. "But first your shoes."

The master watched him finish getting dressed in silence. He took his apprentice to a farm house outside the city. There they found a ragged man peering in a window at a couple making love. LaCroix

didn't think it necessary to explain the details to the young man. He simply crushed the mortal's larynx and then dragged the man away from the house to a copse of bushes. Jean Pierre followed.

"Feed now," the teacher said as he subdued the man.

The apprentice made a face but obeyed. When he was finished, the older man took his meal.

Afterwards, LaCroix led his friend away.

"I think," Jean Pierre said, "of all the senses, I would have been just as happy if smell had been left the way it was before I crossed over."

The teacher shrugged. "It's information."

"I know, and not fatal. But, ugh."

"The same could be said for war and famine."

"And with a lot more cause," the young man nodded. "But still..."

"You also have as much control over the one as you do the others."

"So shut up and learn to live with it, huh?"

"Well, perhaps not those exact terms, but yes."

"You're right," Jean Pierre agreed finally.

"Are you still tired?" LaCroix asked.

"A little."

"And the pain?"

"Pretty much gone."

"I had hoped for something better than 'pretty much'."

"I'm fine," the young man smiled.

"Fine enough to go home and to bed?"

Jean Pierre nodded.

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The teacher took him to his home and then bade him good night at the door to his room.

"And to you," said the young man.

Out of sight, LaCroix listened to his friend drop into his bed. The teacher made sure that Gabrielle was aware of Jean Pierre's presence. Then he left for his own hunt. When he returned, he was no closer to his goal of finding Jean Pierre's rapists, but he had eliminated one more possibility.

He looked in on his young friend. The apprentice was dozing fitfully. LaCroix reached out his hand to calm him and found his arm caught in long fingers almost from the moment he made contact. Moments passed as they seemed to stare at each other. But there was no centering in the blue eyes.

"Stay?" whispered the young voice.

The master hesitated only a moment before shedding his outer garments and finally his boots.

Sighing, Jean Pierre wrapped himself around the settling older man. "I lo—" he began softly.

"Shhh."

The young man shied away as if struck.

"To speak of such things weakens them," LaCroix said quietly.

"How?"

"Love has been known to die if flaunted too openly."

"Then I hope...I hope I never leave you. I know I'll regret it, no matter what the reason."

The teacher waited for slumber to reclaim the young man before muttering, "So say we all."

The words were barely out of his mouth before he, too, was asleep.

* * *

The next night LaCroix disentangled himself from his still unconscious apprentice, and went up to the studio. He was working on one of several paintings, when he sensed Denis enter the room.

"It's him, isn't it?" the former prostitute said.

The teacher turned from the painting on his easel to find Denis staring at a canvas propped against the wall.

"Explain," said the older man.

"It's Jean Pierre."

The figure in oils was indeed his young friend. But as yet the image had no face. Only the familiar body was evident. LaCroix looked at the servant, who in turn studied the nude form with pleasure.

Why did the prostitute's interest seem so less objectionable than Shabot's? The master put the question aside. "Did you want something?" LaCroix asked aloud.

"Yes, sir. There's a lady downstairs, asking to see you."

"A lady?"

"Yes, sir. She came in a carriage with a few others. But she's the only one...like you...and him," Denis gestured to the painting.

"Of the Blood, you mean, Denis."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Take her into the main salon. I will be down shortly."

"Yes, sir. ...Sir? What will you do with it?" the mortal asked, still looking at the unfinished oil.

"I'm not sure. It's not quite something we can hang in the main hall, is it?"

"I would be more than honored to have it in my room. ...Sir."

"I will consider it," LaCroix said. "The lady, did she give a name?"

"No, sir."

"I see. Go now."

"Sir." The mortal left.

When the teacher opened the salon doors, he was surprised to find a young woman. "Jeanette," he greeted.

"Sir. I heard about Jean Pierre. I wanted to ask after him. Where he is and so on."

"Where he is?" LaCroix questioned. "Where would he be, but here?"

"But I heard that he was hurt," she protested.

"And so he was. But he is almost recovered now. It's been more than a month."

"But I heard—"

"Heard what?" the master said impatiently. "I'm sorry, Jeanette, we've been much too busy to listen to gossip. What did you hear?"

"I heard that he drank an immortal's blood. That he killed an immortal."

"That is correct."

"But you told us that to drink the blood of our own kind is fatal."

"I said it was poison, Jeanette. A fine distinction, I will grant you. But a very real one, made obvious by the fact he is still alive."

"But how?"

"I don't know," the teacher shrugged. "It's often occurred to me that he is much stronger than any of us realize, including himself."

"Then he's all right."

LaCroix nodded. "For the most part."

"For what part?" she insisted.

"He's adjusting. And he probably will be for some time to come."

"Then they were right. He is blind."

"Yes."

"What do you mean, 'yes'? He's blind."

"I'm quite familiar with the term, Jeanette. Blind does not mean mentally deficient. He's not even physically impaired."

"Blindness seems pretty physical to me."

"For an immortal?" the teacher countered. "Or even not. Much depends on your mental state. He is quite capable."

"So, you're going to take care of him now?" There was disbelief in her voice.

"He takes care of himself. He's not helpless. And he's not alone."

"But he's an artist. I would think he'd rather be dead."

"And what of sculpture, Jeanette? As for the other, I have no intention of letting him harm himself."

"But why? What good is he to you now?"

LaCroix sighed. "The same good he was before. Do you think I chose him for his sight?" The teacher looked up to see Jean Pierre standing in the doorway. "I chose him for his mind and his heart. What he is, is not dependent on his eyes."

"You love him," Jeanette challenged.

"Love"? An overly used word, at best. Whether true or not, it still is no one's concern but mine."

"I suppose that's right. He doesn't need to see in bed."

"Hello, Jeanette," the young voice cracked.

She flew to him. "Jean Pierre, how are you? I was so worried."

"Were you? How are you? You sound beautiful," the apprentice smiled.

"I'm so sorry, my dear one. How terrible it must be for you."

"Not so terrible," the young man shrugged. "I'm doing pretty well really. I'm learning all sorts of new things. And would you believe my hearing is even sharper now?"

"Oh, my darling. You're so brave."

"Not so brave, either. But I'm alive and I'm learning."

"Would you...would you like to go out with me? You can show me what you've learned."

"Thank you, but no. I'm due to go out by myself tonight."

"By yourself?!" she exclaimed with an accusing glare at LaCroix.

"Why not? I've done it before."

"You have?!"

"I have," he nodded. "Would you like to come up and see what we're working on?"

The teacher thought of the painting he had left in the studio. He was almost disappointed when he heard Jeanette say, "Ah, no. I have some friends waiting."

Jean Pierre sighed, "It's all right. I'm not posing for him right now."

Somehow LaCroix doubted that Jeanette would appreciate the difference.

"But you still do, don't you?" she said.

The older man spoke up. "Of course."

"Then nothing's changed," she muttered.

"Hardly nothing," the apprentice said stiffly.

"But then again," the teacher put in, "in some ways, hardly anything at all."

"Shall I walk you to the door?" Jean Pierre asked sadly.

"Yes, please. Goodbye, sir," Jeanette said with restraint to LaCroix.

"Goodbye."

The young couple was not long at saying their farewells.

"Why did she come?" Jean Pierre asked when he returned.
The teacher shook his head. "Curiosity, perhaps. Concern."
"We've lost so much. Or was it ever really there?"
"It was there. But things change."
"I think I hate change."
"Then you hate life," LaCroix said simply.
Silence.
The teacher asked, "You wish to go out alone?"
"No. ...But yes."
"Very well."

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Time passed, not easily and not necessarily well. But the young man progressed through bouts of depression and pain. Acceptance eluded him.

Finally the day came when LaCroix had an answer—not one that he was happy with, but an answer nevertheless. He found his young friend in the studio, standing near the teacher's easel.

"What is it?" the apprentice asked, tapping the wooden frame.

"You."

"Me? Doing what?"

"Remember Rousseau's suggested composition for you?"

"The one with me and two other men."

"That's the one," said the older man. "I was curious to see how it would work...without one of the figures."

"Without which one?"

"The one at your feet."

Jean Pierre nodded, remembering. "Are you going to give it to him? Rousseau, I mean."

"No." The answer was short and definite.

Jean Pierre blinked, as if trying to see something more clearly. "What is it?" he asked. "Are you all right?" LaCroix seemed agitated.

"St. Clemens is dead."

"Who?"

"The other Blood who attacked you."

"St. Clemens," the young man repeated. "I don't know him. I don't think I know him."

"He evidently knew you."

"How did he die?"

"I didn't do it."

The apprentice nodded.

"Do you believe me?" LaCroix asked.

"Of course."

"Of course? I would have a few doubts if our roles were reversed."

"Why would you lie?"

"Because I would have much rather had 'my arrows drunk with their blood and my sword gorged with flesh,'" the teacher raged.

Jean Pierre nodded. "What happened?"

"Someone else killed him."

"Who?"

"The woman. Lislè. She cut off his head."

"What?"

"Evidently, the state of undress you thought you saw was a normal condition."

"Why?"

"Why not? She was beautiful and it's not as if she had any choice in the matter," the master shrugged.

"What happened to her?"

"Remember you said she was blooded, but not like Shabot and not like one of our own, either? She was blooded but by several different immortals."

"That can be done?"

"Not often, no. This Lislè must have been most unusual. St. Clemens lent her out once too often. Churoset drank of her. It drove her over the edge. She turned on St. Clemens. And then she tried it on Churoset. He broke her neck."

"So they're all dead," said Jean Pierre. "But why? Why did they do it?"

"I wish I could say. The only possible reason I've been able to decipher in all of this is that St. Clemens and I have not been on speaking terms for a good long while."

"But why me?"

"Because you're close to me. Guilt by association."

The young man sighed. "It's not very satisfying, is it?"

"No," LaCroix agreed. "But if nothing else, now we can concentrate on you."

"You haven't been?"

The teacher shrugged. "Do you want to go out?"

"I'm going to become a glutton."

"Not until you can see again."

"You think it's still possible?"

"There are no blind immortals. I would just as soon that you did not have that particular distinction. Yes, I believe it is still possible."

"But what else is there to do?"

"What about another orgy?"

"Oh, the rooftop again."

"Are you afraid I'll take advantage of you?" the teacher asked sharply.

"If you'd wanted, you could have before now."

"Are you so certain I haven't already done so?"

Jean Pierre considered. "Yes," he said finally.

"Oh, ye of great faith," LaCroix smiled.

"Then tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong."

The young man froze. "I don't believe you," he said.

"You are an innocent, my friend."

"Why? Because I trust you?"

"Exactly."

"If I'm stuck with this, then you're stuck with that."

"So, when you can see again, you won't trust me?" the master teased.

"You're trying to trip me up. And doing a great job of it."

"Let us go."

The teacher took him to another garden. This one was behind a high wall with perhaps a dozen mortals. It was ostensibly a party. For LaCroix it was labor as he moved his friend among the gentry.

Jean Pierre took blood from five women before they left for the apprentice's patio house.

"How do you feel?" the older man asked yet again.

"Tired. And blind."

Patience.

"Will you stay with me today?" the young man asked.

"Perhaps later." LaCroix needed to do his own hunting.

He followed his apprentice to his bedroom. They were both surprised to find Gabrielle waiting there. The teacher quickly shielded himself.

"What is it?" Jean Pierre asked gently.

"I wanted...to talk to you," the girl asked nervously.

"About what?"

"About what I said to M. LaCroix. I didn't mean to cause any trouble. Denis said he was very angry."

"It's over now, Gabrielle. He was angry. But now he's not."

"I was afraid he was going to hurt you."

"No."

"Are you angry with me?" she asked fearfully. "Will you send me back?"

"No. You'll stay here with Denis," Jean Pierre said quietly.

"Denis said that you need blood. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Denis said it's the only thing that seems to help you."

"Yes, it does."

"Will you take my blood, then?"

"It's not necessary, Gabrielle."

"It is necessary. I have to make up for what I've done. You've been so good to me. And to Denis. You took us both out of that place."

"It's all right."

"Please, sir. I have nothing else to give. Not even..." she swallowed, "virginity."

"No. I don't need to know." Jean Pierre shook his head.

"Then, please. M. LaCroix may never forgive me. But you have to."

"Gabrielle."

"Please. Denis said it didn't hurt. Let me do this."

"Very well," Jean Pierre nodded as he began unbuttoning his shirt. "Will you hum a song for me like before?"

"Do you...do you want to dance with me again?" She was afraid and hopeful all at once.

"Yes," the young man smiled.

His shirt was open to the waist now. Jean Pierre lightly put his hands on her shoulders. Gabrielle began to hum as she brought her fingers to rest on the inside of his elbows. She would be able to pull his arms away and run if need be.

An interesting arrangement, LaCroix conceded, if a little awkward. Of course, even if she escaped his young friend, or more likely, that he allowed her to, that didn't mean the older man would give her the same option.

Slowly, the couple circled each other.

"Yes, I like that," Jean Pierre smiled. "Can you hear the music, Gabrielle? In your head? The violins?"

"Yes," she whispered. "How do you...?"

"Just listen," he whispered. "I like your music."

The girl was relaxed now. "But what about—?" she began.

"In a minute. Will you give me your hand?"

Frightened again, the young woman curled her hands into fists.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Gabrielle. Didn't Denis tell you? I can't."

"No," she squeaked.

"I can't...penetrate...anything. I won't hurt you."

"But why...?"

"There's a lot you can teach me."

"Teach you?"

"How to deal with the darkness. How to deal with...the attack," he frowned slightly.

She started to pull away.

"Please?" he said quickly. "Touch me?"

"No," she gasped.

"Oh, not there. That has little meaning for me now. But here?" He guided her hand inside his shirt to his breast. "Yes," he sighed.

Cautiously, she explored the flat muscle with her finger. Jean Pierre returned his hand to her shoulder.

"Are you handsome?" she whispered.

The young man laughed. "No."

"Denis says you're beautiful."

"Denis is very kind."

She nodded.

"You and I have been very lucky, Gabrielle, to have such friends."

She felt the texture of his nipple.

"Ahhh," he crooned.

She started to withdraw.

"Don't stop."

"That...pleases you?" she asked.

"Very much," he breathed.

Gabrielle brought her palm up his chest until her fingers touched his throat. Her eyes were wide and unseeing. Jean Pierre's were just as blind, but glittering.

LaCroix nodded.

Slowly, Jean Pierre lowered his head and then drank. After a few moments, he picked her up in his arms and put her on his bed.

"I..." she mumbled.

"Sleep now," he smiled. "You've done your penance," he finished in a whisper.

She closed her eyes and slept.

The two men left the room. Without speaking, they went down the stairs to the master's bedroom. In the cellar, they prepared for bed.

LaCroix mentally shrugged. His meal could wait until tomorrow.

"Why," Jean Pierre asked thoughtfully, "did she taste different?"

"Different how?"

The nude young man sat on the edge of the bed. "I don't know. Sweeter, purer, somehow. Different. Stronger than the others."

"Perhaps because she has a limited diet. Not so many candies and liqueurs. You had a certain richness yourself, when I tasted of you."

"Did I?" the apprentice asked, locking his arms around his knees.

"Why else do you think I kept you supplied with fruit in those days before your mother died?"

"Because we were hungry, I thought."

"So much for my benign reputation," LaCroix smiled as he laid down.

"You are good," the young man countered. He put his head down on his teacher's chest and then curled in close. "A good heart," Jean Pierre mumbled, as he drifted to sleep.

"And you are perhaps," said the older man, "the only one to ever think so."

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The next evening, LaCroix woke to find his charge still asleep at his breast. Hardly surprising since the People tended to move very little during their rest.

The teacher waited.

The young man moved. LaCroix remained still as he watched through slitted eyes. The apprentice stretched to touch a pleat in his master's sleeve. Jean Pierre lifted himself up. Light fingers followed the crease in the material to LaCroix's shoulder. The young man explored shoulder and throat to chin. Then the fullness of the teacher's mouth was minutely investigated. The master darted a tongue tip to the fingers.

Surprised, bright blue eyes flashed into his. LaCroix smiled. He was met with an answering grin.

Quickly, the young man got up and began to dress. He was distracted, however, by objects in the master's room that he had paid scant attention to before. The large framed painting was largely ignored, but not its accompanying smaller drawings. Jean Pierre studied each one.

A questioning look was sent to his teacher. LaCroix said nothing but merely pointed to the apprentice's still open trousers. Absently, the young man finished the buttons as he seemed to memorize every detail in the room.

The teacher grabbed up some cloaks as he trailed Jean Pierre's passage up the stairs. Once on the roof, he was greeted by anxious hands that pulled him into the sky.

A lopsided game of Follow the Leader ensued as the apprentice sped off to view various objects at close range and then rushed back to circle the older man. Trees, buildings, lamp posts and several horses were so scrutinized.

LaCroix was aware of a matching expression of joy on his own features as he paralleled the young man's final descent to one of the bell towers of Notre Dame. Jean Pierre looked out over the city.

"Let the heaven be glad and the earth rejoice," the apprentice crowed.

"Let the sea and what fills it resound," LaCroix agreed.

The young man sighed happily as he slowly settled into tranquillity. "I guess this means I have to sleep alone now."

The teacher considered the idea. "We'll discuss it," he smiled.



WHEN
YOU GIVE
BLOOD
YOU ALLOW
ANOTHER
SUNSET,
GRANT
ANOTHER
NIGHT,
SUSTAIN
ANOTHER
EXISTENCE,
PROVIDE
ANOTHER
CHANCE,
SUPPLY
ANOTHER
LIFE.



VAMPIRE
FOUNDATION
BLOOD DRIVE

GIVE TILL
IT HURTS

P JENSEN, CALIF 1993

Holiday

By: B.N. Fish

(Story #6 in The LaCroix Chronicles)

Visions. Images from long ago. Acts learned and savored briefly. But now they were shared with another.

"Misha?"

This new companion was older than that other had been: older, leaner, with darker hair. Only the eyes were similar. Crystal blue eyes like daylit skies.

"What is it?"

In the vision, LaCroix reached for his companion, giving caresses to a willing novice.

"Misha, please." Hands gently rocked his shoulders.

Motions that had become repulsive became rousing. Actions that had become bitter were now sweet. All due to the warm presence in his arms.

"Please, wake up."

LaCroix opened his eyes. A frantic Jean Pierre hovered over him, a Jean Pierre clad only in an open shirt.

"Are you all right?" the young man asked worriedly.

"Yes," the teacher said quietly.

"I thought you said we didn't dream," the apprentice accused, sitting beside him on the bed.

"Only mortals need dreams, Jean Pierre. I knew when you entered the room. I heard you talk to me. I even felt you touch me."

"What was it, then?"

"I've never heard an adequate term for it. Lorraine calls it 'imaginings.' But for me they're usually memories, things that happened long ago, problems that have no solutions."

"I've done that," the young man said slowly.

LaCroix looked up into blue eyes. He stroked his thumb over a slim thigh. "I know," he said, remembering those dark nights when Jean Pierre trembled in his arms.

"Do I have any secrets from you?" the apprentice asked.

"Perhaps one or two. Do you want any?"

"I'll let you know," the young man smiled. The expression faded. "It's strange. Their faces are becoming more clear all the time. They're all dead. But I see them with their grins and their hands on me. They didn't even know me and still they hated me."

"Not you, Jean Pierre. Me."

The young man nodded as he entwined his fingers with those of his teacher.

LaCroix settled back with satisfaction, his one hand still resting on a bare leg.

"What were you dreaming... 'imagining' about?" Jean Pierre asked.

"Nothing of consequence. I have already made my decision. Therefore, there is no problem."

"Too many questions?"

"Never too many, my friend. But...you should finish getting dressed." The teacher tugged a loose sleeve.

"In a minute," the young man mumbled, holding the captured hand close to his chest as he closed his eyes.

"And Shabot?" the teacher said, sitting up without dislodging his hand. "Remember him?"

"Do I have to?" Jean Pierre sighed, freeing the other as he got to his feet.

"It seems like a good idea. Especially since it was your suggestion that he come here."

The young man closed his shirt. "I know," the apprentice grimaced, as he worked the buttons, his head tossed back.

LaCroix took in the long throat. "I'm sure that Shabot will appreciate your current wardrobe, but..."

"I'm going. I'm going," Jean Pierre said, walking away. Then he looked back. "I am glad we came."

The older man got up and went to the wash stand. "I am quite willing to take credit for the trip. After all, a holiday in Trouville seemed a fitting celebration for the return of your good health. However, you are responsible for our entourage."

"Well, it seemed like a good idea."

"Did it?"

"And I wanted Gabrielle and Denis to come with us," the apprentice admitted.

"So why burden me with Shabot and his family?"

"It wasn't fair for me to have two servants and you to have no one."

"I have tended myself for some time now."

"I know. But it was a good way to give us an aura of mortal wealth and station," said the apprentice hopefully.

"As a matter of record, Jean Pierre, you have more royalty in your blood than I do."

"You said we had the same blood now," the young man grinned.

LaCroix sighed. "Heaven save us from clever young men."

"Am I? Too clever?"

"No. But tell me again: why Shabot?"

"You needed a servant."

"You said that."

"And he gives us status."

"To which I've already given a counter argument."

"And he'd go crazy if he was away from you for a month," the young man said quickly.

"Your concern for his welfare is touching."

"Not really. I can barely cope with a sane Shabot. I don't want to take on an insane one."

"And his family?" LaCroix questioned.

"He suggested bringing his family."

"But if he hadn't, you would have," the older man shot back.

"Well," the apprentice said guiltily, "I thought with his family around, he wouldn't be underfoot all the time."

"I see," LaCroix smiled. "You are developing a devious mind. I approve."

"Maybe too devious. I'm a little ashamed of myself."

"Don't be. Shame is much like impurity. It comes from within. You've done nothing to be ashamed of."

Denis stood outside the open bedroom door. "I should be so ashamed," he said.

The sudden appearance startled the apprentice. "Where's Gabrielle?" he asked, glancing down at his undressed state.

"Jean Pierre," the teacher said patiently, "she's blind. She can't see you."

"I know. But it's the idea. Where is she?"

"In our room," the servant said. "Shabot's waiting in the hall."

"Is he?" said the older man. "Jean Pierre, I think you'd best..." He waved a hand toward the young man's nudity.

"Yeah."

The apprentice passed Denis, crossed LaCroix's small sitting room, to the main parlor, and toward his own room.

LaCroix watched his passage with interest. He wasn't surprised to find a licentious look on the manservant's face, as he, too, looked on.

"Wait two more minutes, then let Shabot into the salon," the older man instructed.

"Yes, sir. ...Sir?"

"What?"

"Does Shabot have...any authority over us? Gabrielle and me?"

In his mind's eye, the teacher could see the possible trouble Shabot could be giving these two younger mortals. "No," he said with finality. "Your authority and your allegiance belong only to Jean Pierre."

"And you."

The older man inclined his head. "As you say. But if there is ever a choice to be made between he and I..."

Denis said, "We belong to him."

LaCroix acknowledged that this new servant had definite promise. "Have you told Jean Pierre about any problems?"

"No, sir. I think I can take care of it. I wanted to know how far I can go to stop him."

"You can do whatever needs to be done to insure my apprentice's health and peace of mind."

"Yes, sir."

"However, I'm afraid Jean Pierre will be concerned if you kill him."

"And you? Sir," Denis added quietly.

"I have given you your authority."

"Yes, sir," Denis nodded, beginning to withdraw.

"One thing more. If there does arise some difficulty that you can't...take care of, first tell Jean Pierre. And then come to me."

"Yes, sir, but do you think that's wise?"

The older man looked at the servant sharply.

"No, sir," Denis said quickly, "I don't mean to question your judgment. But if I tell Jean Pierre, he'll want to handle Shabot himself."

"That is his right."

"Yes, sir. But Shabot is dangerous. I've seen the way he looks at him."

"It's much the same way you look at him."

Denis opened his mouth.

As you do? LaCroix could almost hear the thought.

But wisely, the servant lowered his head and said, "Yes, sir."

The teacher smiled, knowing that it didn't show on his face. - This mortal had been a good choice.
 "But he's so young," Denis said softly.
 "He's older than you."
 "Yes, sir. But I've had more of an education."
 "And would you wish it on him?" the older man asked coolly.
 "No, sir," Denis replied. "But I could wish it on Shabot."
 LaCroix cleared his throat to kill the laughter that was threatening to come forth. *Yes, a good choice.*
 "Go, now. Let Shabot in," he instructed.
 "Yes, sir."

* * *

Some hours later, the teacher and Jean Pierre were walking on the beach.
 "It's beautiful here," said the young man, watching the tide.
 LaCroix said nothing, keeping his main attention on where they were going.
 "Is there really more ocean than there is land?" the apprentice asked.
 "So I've heard. But since I have yet to see all the land or all the ocean, I can't say."
 "Do you only believe in what you can see?"
 Hardly a simple question. "No," the teacher admitted.
 To his relief, the young man only nodded. That discussion would only be deflected for a while, he was sure.
 "It's like a lady's petticoats, miles and miles of ruffled lace," the apprentice grinned.
 "I'm glad you're enjoying it."
 "But you don't, do you? You only came because of me."
 "It's reason enough," the teacher shrugged. "I was born in a fishing village, Jean Pierre. The sea lost its magic for me long ago." *Assuming it was ever there.*
 The young man climbed up an outcrop of rocks and sat, still watching the ocean. "Have you been on a boat, then?"
 "Once or twice," LaCroix answered, settling on a lower stone.
 "What's it like?"
 "I can't really tell you. I almost drowned, so my memories are some what biased."
 "What happened? Did your boat sink?"
 "No. Someone decided I should learn how to swim." LaCroix looked out to sea, but he could feel the young man watching him.
 "...You were a fisherman?" Jean Pierre asked cautiously.
 "Not really. I gutted fish and cleaned nets. Not an exciting life. I ran away when I was eleven."
 There was no point in mentioning the two abortive attempts before that.
 "What..." the apprentice hesitated, "...what about you family?"
 "My mother...died something under a month earlier."
 "Wasn't there anyone else?"
 "No."
 "I'm sorry. I know I can't be like your family..."
 "But you are. More than a son. Closer than a brother. Certainly closer than any I ever knew," the teacher said.
 Jean Pierre became very still.
 "I was a bastard," LaCroix said. He could feel the protest and sympathy, even without the words.

"I was the only dark-haired brat in a village of tow-heads. There was no way my mother could claim I was her husband's son. Just who was my father was never determined."

"Didn't she ever tell you?"

"No."

The apprentice jumped down. Wide-eyed he stared into his friend's eyes. *//You have me now, //* came his thought.

The older man smiled. "So I do."

The young man hugged him.

LaCroix enjoyed the presence in his arms. He could also feel a wet mouth at his throat.

"Really, Jean Pierre," the teacher said, gently disengaging himself, "accosting me on a public beach."

"I don't care who knows that I love you," the apprentice told him, reluctantly letting him go.

"Ah, but there's love and then there's *love*."

"Even if we were lovers... Besides, it seems that most everybody thinks we are anyway," the young man said, stepping back.

"True. But there's a certain satisfaction in knowing their assumptions are wrong." LaCroix got to his feet. "Shall we go?"

The apprentice fell into step beside him. "I don't think you should have introduced me to Shabot's family," the young man said.

"And why is that?"

"He didn't like it."

"Shabot's likes or dislikes are of little concern," the master said with indifference.

"The lady wasn't too happy, either. And did you see the kids?" the apprentice went on before LaCroix could comment. "They were terrified. I've never thought of myself as being that imposing."

"It is barely possible," the older man said slowly, "that Shabot has been telling tales about you."

"What? That I'm a guttersnipe whore robbing you blind?"

"Perhaps," the teacher said evenly, somewhat surprised at Jean Pierre's words. "He's jealous."

"Of a guttersnipe whore?"

"Of you," LaCroix said calmly. "After all, you're intelligent, beautiful and—"

"And...you chose me," the young man said softly.

"As you say."

"Well, I don't know why you chose me. But I am grateful that you did."

"I don't want your gratitude."

"I know," Jean Pierre conceded. "And I try not to be a pest about it."

"You'll just have to concentrate on being intelligent and beautiful."

"I don't know if I can do that, either. If I'm so smart, why am I always asking questions?"

"Because you also have a certain amount of wisdom."

"Wise? Me?"

They entered and crossed the hotel lobby.

"You perhaps need a little more time before you become a sage. But even so, it is the biggest difference between you and Shabot."

"Shabot isn't stupid," the younger man said as they started up the stairs.

"No. The capability is there. But Shabot has decided not to use it."

"But he was always talking in the park."

"That's true enough," LaCroix nodded. "But he always liked best discussing things he'd already made up his mind about."

"There's a certain comfort in being sure you know all the answers."

"There's also a certain boredom."

They entered the vestibule of their suite of rooms, and draped their cloaks over a chair.

"Shabot does have one possible saving grace," the teacher said.

"What's that?"

"His..." the older man searched for the correct word, "...appreciation of you."

"Appreciation? Is that what you call it?"

"It is something that he, Denis and I all share...to varying degrees."

"And you're all crazy. To varying degrees," Jean Pierre added hastily.

"Thank you," the teacher said dryly. "But why?"

"Well, look at me." Jean Pierre pointed at a large mirror in the main salon. "My chin is too narrow. My nose is too broad. And my hair has a mind of its own."

"I don't think Shabot pays much attention to your hair."

"Without clothes I'm even worse," the man shrugged. "I'm too skinny. I've no real muscle to speak of. Denis is more of a classical man than I am. As are you."

"Me?" LaCroix echoed, surprised.

"Definitely you. You've got a good face, even when I can't see it. And a good breadth to your shoulders."

"I can tell it's long past time to disillusion you of this fantasy. Perhaps while we are here, I might sit for you."

"You mean, pose for me? Here?"

"Yes. And yes."

"In the nude?"

"And again, yes. Unless you've lost interest in the idea?"

"Not hardly," the young man said. "But are you sure you want to do it here?"

"Why not?"

"You said you felt vulnerable when you were naked. Wouldn't it be better to wait until we went back to Paris?"

"Paris or here. It makes no difference. I will be as...uneasy there as here."

"I don't want you to be uneasy," Jean Pierre insisted. "I think..."

"What?"

"I think...I'd rather wait until we were home," the young man finished in a rush.

"Very well," LaCroix agreed, turning calmly away.

"Misha, please. It's not that I don't want to do you." The apprentice touched his arm. "I want to see you, draw you. Everything."

The master looked into the intense face. "Everything?"

"Yes," Jean Pierre said firmly. "But not here."

"Why is that?"

"It's too...open here. There're too many people."

"And there aren't in Paris?" LaCroix smiled.

"I know. I know. I'm not saying it very well. But it's safer at home."

"No place is completely safe, Jean Pierre."

"No, but it feels safer there. Sheltered. I want you safe. I want... I want to guard your modesty the way you have done it for me."

The teacher studied his apprentice.

"I promise," the young man grinned, "when we get home, I'll rip off your clothes and ravish you."

"You'll what?"

"Well, if you co-operate...?"

"I don't believe ravishment is possible if the victim is willing," LaCroix said.

"Maybe," the apprentice conceded. "But it's a lot more fun that way."

"Perhaps. And I will admit that the idea has a certain appeal. When we get back, then. To bed with you, now."

"Yes, sir," Jean Pierre grinned as he turned away. The apprentice started toward his room, then stopped. "They're not here," he said.

"Who?"

"Gabrielle and Denis. It's late. The sun will be up soon."

"Jean Pierre, they are both mortal. They aren't limited by the daylight as you and I are."

"Oh. Yes, of course. I forgot. They are all right, then. Aren't they?"

"If they weren't, you would know."

"How? Oh, you mean the way you do with Shabot."

"Not quite," said LaCroix. "Shabot has been with me much longer than they have been with you. Unfortunately."

"I haven't taken as much blood."

"Yes."

"Then Gabrielle should be more attuned to me since I've taken her twice, but Denis only once."

"Possibly, but not necessarily. The one time you took Denis, you fed quite extensively."

"I almost killed him."

"You didn't," said the older man.

The young man sat heavily on a couch. "But would they know to call me?" he asked. "Not that I could do anything about it in the daytime."

"We can function during the day. Or at least some of us can."

"But I was burned—" Jean Pierre protested.

"You were burned by the light. That doesn't mean you can't walk about during the day but indoors."

The apprentice nodded slowly.

"I know you're tired," the master said. "As you become older, you'll be better able to stay awake. Go on to bed. I'll wait for them, if you wish."

"No, it should be me. They're my responsibility."

"Then stay and wait," said LaCroix, sitting back on a lounge.

The teacher watched as the young man's head fell and jerked up at increasingly frequent intervals. Before too long, the apprentice was asleep sprawled out over the sofa.

It was another hour before the two servants returned. Gabrielle's hand rested on Denis' arm as they entered. He carried a small package. The man froze as he took in LaCroix and the sleeping apprentice.

"What is it?" the girl asked.

The manservant led her to their unconscious master.

"He was worried about you," the older man said coolly.

"But why?" Denis asked.

"He's asleep," Gabrielle announced, surprised.

LaCroix said, "He didn't know where you were. He was afraid that you were in trouble. In the future, you will inform him of your whereabouts. Or better still, you will both be here when the sun comes up."

"Yes, sir," Denis nodded.

"Why doesn't he wake up?" the girl asked as she ran her hands over his face.

"He's very tired. And I doubt your yelling in his ear will help him rest," the teacher said sharply.

"Yes, sir," Gabrielle answered meekly.

"He is all right?" Denis asked.

"He will be, when he's in bed where he belongs."

"Jean Pierre?" the manservant called tentatively as he shook the other's shoulder.

Bleary eyes opened. "Denis...?"

"Yes, sir," the mortal helped him to his feet.

LaCroix noted with some surprise that the young man was able to talk.

"Gabrielle? You're both okay?"

"Yes, sir," said the girl, standing close, as she put her arm around him. "We didn't mean to worry you."

Jean Pierre tried to shake his head. It rolled on his shoulder.

The two servants helped him into his room, and put him on his bed. LaCroix followed.

"Of course you didn't," the apprentice mumbled.

"Should we undress him?" Denis asked the older man.

"No. Wait for me outside."

The two mortals left the room.

"I'm not very strong, either," Jean Pierre said, fighting to keep his eyes open.

"You're stronger than you know. No one else has survived what you have."

"Only because of you."

"Most immortals at your age wouldn't know their own name right now."

"...Georges?"

The teacher smiled. "Sleep now."

The heavy eyes fell shut.

LaCroix touched the young man's cheek. "Sleep," he whispered.

The teacher left the room. As he entered the main salon, he found Denis and Gabrielle getting to their feet.

"How is he?"

"He should be fine. I want you to stay with him through the day. You may take turns if you wish." It would do no harm for them to think their carelessness had somehow hurt their young master.

"Yes, sir. I'll take the first watch, Gabrielle."

"But..." the girl protested.

"Go to bed," the mortal ordered gently. "Come check on me in a couple of hours."

The teacher went to his own rooms without another word.

* * *

LaCroix rose the next evening to find Gabrielle dozing by his apprentice's bed. The young man suddenly opened his eyes and smiled at LaCroix.

The teacher nodded silently in greeting, then indicated the young servant.

"Gabrielle?" the apprentice called softly. "What are you doing here?"

"Sir," she said, jerking awake. "How do you feel?"

"I feel just fine. Why are you here?"

"M. LaCroix told us to stay with you."

The young man frowned at his teacher. "M. LaCroix worries too much."

"He loves you."

"I'd like to think so," the young man said quietly, looking back at the girl.

"He does," she said with conviction.

"How do you know?"

"It's in his voice when he talks to you, or even when he talks about you. It's different when he

talks to us. It's even more different when he talks to M. Shabot."

"Well, I'm grateful for that last, anyway. And you should be, too. You don't want to be equated with Shabot. And you don't have to call Shabot 'monsieur,' either." He sat up.

Gabrielle hesitated before saying, "Yes, sir."

"What is it?" Jean Pierre asked sharply. "Has he been bothering you?"

"No. I try to stay away from him."

"That's probably a good idea. For both you and Denis. You be very careful around him."

"And you."

"Me?"

"Denis says he looks at you a lot."

"Well, that makes us even. I look out for him, too. Gabrielle, do you mind if I clean up while we talk?"

"No, sir."

"And you don't have to call me 'sir,'" the young man said, taking off his shirt.

"M. LaCroix wouldn't like that."

The teacher grinned at his young friend's look of askance. *//She's right, //* he sent.

"Well," Jean Pierre muttered, "you don't have to say it when he's not around."

"Yes, sir."

The apprentice frowned. The older man grinned again.

"Why were you so late yesterday?" Jean Pierre asked, splashing water and soap as he washed up.

"Denis took me to the Music Room. There's a piano there, a beautiful piano."

"So, you got caught up in the music?"

"And we went to the market. We bought you a present," she announced proudly.

"Gabrielle, you shouldn't do that."

"Why not? You got the shawl for me."

Jean Pierre made a face.

LaCroix kept himself from laughing. It was more than satisfying to hear the familiar discussion turned back on his young friend.

"Are you angry?" the girl asked cautiously.

"No. Not that," the apprentice sighed. "But you're not to get me anything else."

"Unless you get something for us," she agreed.

"Now, wait a minute. That's not right."

"Why not?" she demanded, then was suddenly contrite. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk back to you. You've been very good to us."

"Now stop that. I can handle that kind of argument. I love to argue." The young man pointedly ignored the teacher's mock expression of surprise.

"Can..." Gabrielle began and then stopped.

"What?"

"Can I... Can I touch your face?" she got out at last.

"Ah ha. You want to see just how ugly I am," Jean Pierre teased.

"I don't believe that. You're very kind. And Denis says..."

"Denis is not objective."

"Maybe not," she admitted. "He likes you. Does that bother you?" she asked.

"No. Besides, you know Denis likes you very much."

Another silent nod. Slowly, she reached out. Jean Pierre guided her hands to his face. Finger tips skimmed forehead and cheeks. Almost of their own volition, the young man's arms seemed to reach for her. But the apprentice forced them down.

"Are you okay?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes," the girl nodded easily. "It's a good face."

After a moment, Jean Pierre prompted, "Why don't you go see about Denis, now?"

"Yes, sir." The girl left.

The apprentice wrapped his arms around himself.

"Jean Pierre?" LaCroix called softly.

The apprentice twisted around. An open mouth revealed extended blood teeth.

"Why didn't you take her, then?"

The young man shook his head. Then he went to a closet for a shirt. "It's too soon," he said.

"Not really. It's been more than three weeks. You didn't take that much either time."

"Except that I'm hungry, and I'm not sure I would stop in time."

"Hungry?" the teacher questioned.

"You know," the apprentice rambled on, paying all too much attention to the fastenings on his blouse, "I don't understand why I had so much trouble with buttons when I was blind. I mean, I don't normally watch when I'm doing them. You would think..."

"Jean Pierre, don't babble. Just when did you feed last?"

"On the way here," the young man admitted. "With you."

Ten days ago. The teacher frowned. "And what did you do when I sent you out Wednesday?"

"I...went flying along the beach."

"You didn't see anyone?"

"Well, I did. But they were busy."

"And you didn't want to disturb them," LaCroix said dryly.

"I'm not sure they would have noticed," the young man smiled.

"Occupied, were they?"

"Very."

The master sighed. "Finish getting ready. We'll go out."

Jean Pierre obeyed.

The two men exited to the main salon. Gabrielle and Denis were waiting for them, with the package from last night.

The young woman held it out.

The apprentice accepted it. "Thank you."

Carefully, he pulled open the paper and string to find a mass of thin white ropes, tipped with wooden beads. None of the lines were attached, as Jean Pierre lifted each one free.

"Thank you," he said again, frowning with puzzlement.

"What is it?" LaCroix asked for him.

"A belt," Gabrielle said. "Don't you like it?"

"Of course," Jean Pierre said quickly. "I just haven't seen one quite like this. I'll have a lot of belts now."

"They're supposed to be worn together," said Denis.

"All of them?"

"Yes, sir. If I may show you?"

"Okay."

The servant took the six cords and sorted them to their different lengths. Then beginning with the longest, he began, carefully, tying them around his young master's hips. Each strand was a little shorter than the one below it. Each one was woven into the others until all six were banded around the slim body and dangled at graduated lengths over Jean Pierre's right leg.

The young man stared at himself in the mirror. "Very nice," he nodded. He pulled the woven knot over to the side so that the ends of rope and colored beads fell over his hip. "I like it," the apprentice said. "But you'll have to show me again how you tied it. I don't think I got it all."

"I would be pleased, sir."

"Denis used to have one like it," said Gabrielle.

"Did he?" the teacher said, studying how the cords pulled across his young friend's body.

"Mine was black," Denis nodded.

"With bells," the girl added. "Little brass bells."

"This is just fine," the apprentice said. "Do you still have yours?"

"No," the servant said abruptly. "I, uh, left it at Claudette's"

"Oh. That's too bad. I would have liked to see it." Jean Pierre admired himself again, then turned away from the mirror. "Do you have anything to do now? LaCroix and I are going out."

"Where?" Gabrielle asked.

"I don't know. Where?" the young man asked his teacher.

Inwardly, the older man frowned. "There's a walk not too far from the beach. Some local artists have their work displayed."

The apprentice seemed about to invite them to come along, but Denis had been watching the master and caught the slight shake of his head. "I think it would be better if Gabrielle and I stayed here. We have some cleaning up to do."

"Are you sure?" the apprentice asked.

"Jean Pierre," the older man warned.

"I know. I know. Don't pester. But the cleaning can wait."

"That's not what I was going to say," the teacher reproved.

"No?"

"No."

"No," Denis agreed. "Better to get our chores done now."

"All right," the young man conceded.

"We'll be here at sunrise," said the girl.

LaCroix nodded.

"Thank you," said Jean Pierre, "for the belt."

Teacher and apprentice left the suite and then the hotel.

"I am very good at pestering," said the young man.

"Be that as it may, I was referring to your asking them to come with us. You treat them as friends."

"They are friends. I like them."

"They are servants."

"So? A little courtesy is never wasted. You said so."

"It does when it undermines discipline."

"But they have no choice but to obey me. Like Shabot."

"And would you want a servant like Shabot?" the teacher questioned.

"I wouldn't touch Shabot with a five meter whip," the young man said sharply.

"A possible solution," the older shrugged.

"You wouldn't beat him?"

"I have. Often. For all the good it's done, except to vent my own anger, perhaps."

"But he doesn't have any choice but to obey you, either."

"Not if I give him a direct command, no. But obedience of the heart is another matter. If it were only a matter of telling him, he would never have attacked you or tried to buy your services."

Jean Pierre made a face. "He's one of the best arguments against prostitution I've ever met."

"Give me another," said the teacher as he directed them down the street.

"Gabrielle," the young man said promptly.

"Shall I give you a counter-argument?"

"Who? Claudette?"

"A good choice," LaCroix conceded. "But I was thinking of Denis. He enjoyed his work."

"Do you think he misses it?"

"Very possibly."

"Should I—"

"There," the older an interrupted, pointing toward the beach.

A line of varying sized and shaped canvases came into view. The two men parted as they examined each painting.

LaCroix was not surprised to note that there was something less than a great amount of talent on display. But still it seemed to be part of an artist's nature to be compelled to view other artists' work. One never knew from where inspiration might come.

However, the inspiration here was sporadic at best. For the teacher, even second-hand inspiration was non-existent. The few pieces of pornography were boring and not very accurate. The master glanced about and didn't see his young friend.

//*Jean Pierre*// he sent out the mental call.

But the apprentice didn't bother with mind voice. "Sir?"

The teacher turned toward the sound.

"I'm over here."

'Over here' became not that far away. Only out of the teacher's line of vision, behind a pile of rocks, closer to the ocean.

"Come look at this." Jean Pierre led him to another cluster of paintings.

A different artist this time. And different subjects. Not quite pornography. But all nudes. All solitary.

"What do you think?" the young man asked.

There was a single male on the canvas, on all fours, his head pointed away from the observer.

"Well?" Jean Pierre prompted.

The technique was adequate, but not remarkable. The subject matter was... LaCroix shrugged.

"Why" the apprentice began, choosing his words carefully, "is it...interesting?"

"Do you find it so?" the older man asked, keeping the surprise out of his voice.

"Yes. And I don't know why," Jean Pierre frowned. "I mean, the perspective is pretty good. I'm not sure that I could do as well. I wonder... Do you think Denis would mind posing for me like that?"

"You will tell Denis to pose for you. As for that," LaCroix nodded at the painting, "perhaps it only appeals to your pruient interests."

The young man shook his head in embarrassment. "If it is," he murmured. "If it is, why? It's hardly his best feature."

"Are you so sure?"

"I like faces. Torsos and arms are good. But this... What is the appeal?"

The teacher studied Jean Pierre's face. "Why try to rationalize lust?" LaCroix asked.

"Because even lust has a reason. I just don't see why this makes me feel..."

"Feel what?"

"I don't know. ...Power? ...Control. But why control? What has this to do with...?" The young man waved his hand at the oil painting.

"Perhaps," the master offered thoughtfully, "it's because, in addition to being a possible pose of enticement, it is also a pose of submission."

"Submission?"

"Consider: a man on hands and knees, a man presenting his backside, exposing himself fully to eye, and hand, and foot, and weapon."

Jean Pierre glowered. "I'm not sure that's not just as bad as lust."

"I'm in favor of lust, myself," came a female voice.
 The two men turned to find a woman in paint-smudged clothes.
 "Are they yours?" the apprentice asked, pointing the paintings.
 "You can't tell?" the artist mocked, indicating her appearance.
 "You're good," the young man said.
 "For a woman?" she challenged.
 "For anyone," Jean Pierre shrugged. "It's an interesting angle."
 "It's my favorite of these."
 "Are there more?"
 "In my room," she smiled.
 "Why don't you two go ahead," LaCroix suggested. "I have other matters to attend to."
 "Are you sure?" the young man asked. "I can..."
 "I'm sure. Perhaps you can compare painting techniques."
 "Are you an artist?" the woman asked.
 "LaCroix's the artist," the apprentice answered. "I'm still learning."
 "We're all still learning," she said sagely.
 The young man asked him again, "Are you sure you don't mind?"
 "Go. And enjoy, my friend." The older man walked away.
 Behind him, he heard the woman say, "Do you always ask permission?"
 And Jean Pierre's reply, "Courtesy is never wasted."
 The young man would deal with her.

LaCroix set about finding his own supper. He found it in a middle-aged prostitute who was coming out of an alley. She eyed him speculatively. The teacher helped himself to an offered breast which strained to escape its confines of a gaping blouse. The woman smiled. The master walked with her back into the alley.

Afterwards, sated, if not satisfied, the older man took his time getting back to the hotel. He doubted that Jean Pierre would return there soon.

He wandered on the beach for a time, discovering more than one moonlit couple. He also found some caves among the boulders that were scattered along the shore line. His young friend might find them of interest.

LaCroix found himself staring out to sea, wondering why these waters seemed more hospitable than the ones of his birth. He shook his head. Some memories were best left in the past. At least, as much as they would be left there.

The teacher eventually made his way back to their rooms, still expecting to find them empty. But he found Jean Pierre out on the balcony. Silently, LaCroix stepped beside him.

"You fed," the older man said finally, not really a question.

"Yes, sir."

The teacher cleared his throat.

"Yes-s-s-s," the young man corrected. He continued to look out on the ocean. "Gabrielle and Denis left a note. They've gone to the Music Room again."

LaCroix nodded, waiting.

The apprentice sighed. "Would you like to go somewhere?"

"Tell me first what's troubling you."

The young man shook his head in frustration. "...I don't..." He shrugged.

"Is it serious?"

"No," the answer was definite.

The teacher nodded. "Very well." He put aside his curiosity with difficulty. "You should, perhaps, change your clothes, if we're going out again."

"I thought maybe along the beach," Jean Pierre said quickly. "It won't matter who sees me there." The master frowned. *Something is amiss.* "I'll see you," he said. "Change your clothes." The apprentice nodded and turned toward his room. The older man followed. He stood in the doorway, watching. The young man pulled out a clean shirt. He shed his rumpled one, keeping his back to his teacher. He drew on the new blouse. "Jean Pierre, turn around." The apprentice hesitated. Then he pivoted, reveling his bare chest. LaCroix saw some faintly bloodied welts across the young man's breast. "The artist," the teacher said flatly. "The woman artist." "Explain." Jean Pierre shook his head. "It's too..." "What?!" "Ridiculous." The master gritted his teeth. "Tell me what happened," he ordered. "I would rather go out," the apprentice said. "I'll tell you, but can't we walk out on the shore?" "Very well. But leave the shirt. Wrap your cloak around you." The garment was quickly tossed on the bed.

* * *

Even before they arrived at the seaside, Jean Pierre began talking. "I met the model from the painting. You were right.. It was his best feature." LaCroix only nodded. "I think you were right about the submission, too," the young man sighed. "Was I?" "Yeah." The older man wondered, "Is that how those scratches came about?" "No. At least, I don't think so." "'Think'? Jean Pierre, I'm getting rather tired of this drawn out narration. Just tell me what happened." "We went back to her rooms. She shares them with some others. We were talking about painting, and the poses, especially that one. She kept on saying how she was a woman artist..." The young man went on with his story, as they arrived at the water's edge. LaCroix payed only half attention, as he watched his young friend. The apprentice knelt and began digging into the sand. Hands began shaping a figure out of the wet grains. The tale went on. Jean Pierre flipped the edge of cloak over his shoulder. Moonlight played on the planes of the young face. The teacher noted the pattern of light as it traveled over the curve of deltoïd and biceps. Pale skin glowed. The young man kept talking, unaware of the composition he made. A composition that could be improved, in the teacher's opinion. The older man made a few mental notes for a future study, perhaps an oil. "...Menses." LaCroix's mind snagged on the word he thought he heard. "What?" he asked. Jean Pierre looked up, exposing his long throat to the pale light. "I know. I know," he sighed and

closed his eyes.

The pulse in the vulnerable neck almost distracted the teacher. Almost. "What," the master said distinctly, "did you just say?"

"You mean I have to repeat it? It took me long enough to get it out the second time."

"And the first?"

The young man looked ashamed. "It came out when I wasn't looking?"

LaCroix held back the reprimand, and said instead, "What came out?"

The apprentice took a breath and blurted out, "That if her work was so unique, did that mean she painted with her menses."

The teacher kept his sagging jaw in check, while his gaze went out to the uncaring ocean. Shock warred with amusement. Discipline kept his voice even. "I didn't realize," he said calmly, "that your mind ran along such lines."

"I didn't, either. She kept on going on how because she's a woman, she paints with a different style from any man. And then it was out of my mouth."

"Is that what brought on that?" LaCroix indicated the fading wounds on the young man's chest.

"No. That happened later. It was part of her lovemaking," Jean Pierre grimaced.

"As I remember," the teacher said slowly, "Jeanette used to leave similar marks on you at times."

"But Jeanette would wait until I was so into the sex that I didn't care about anything else."

LaCroix considered. "So, what did you do then?"

"I fed."

There is more, the teacher sensed. His young friend was not telling him everything. The master reached down and touched Jean Pierre's throat. "You fed well," he noted with some surprise. "Is she still alive?" he asked, not really caring.

"Yes. I...I took one of her friends, too."

"Did you?" The teacher was astounded now.

"Yes. I... It was a mess."

"This friend," the older man asked. "Was it male or female?"

"Male," Jean Pierre said with a deep breath. "He got in bed with us. He came up behind me and tried to..." The young man shuddered.

LaCroix could easily imagine what the 'friend' had tried to do. The teacher turned away without thinking. Then he was startled by a hand on his wrist. The master looked to find Jean Pierre on his feet, having trampled his sand cast back into the beach.

"I'm all right," the apprentice said quickly. "Nothing happened."

The older man contemplated the half clad body before him, wondering now if the trousers hid other injuries. The protectiveness toward his apprentice should have alarmed him. But it was the possessiveness that worried him more.

"I took care of it," Jean Pierre promised.

"And this 'friend'? Is he alive?"

"Yes. But he's going to sleep a long time."

"Death is a reasonable solution."

"But it's so permanent."

"Yes," LaCroix agreed.

"I can't kill everyone who might—" The young man shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because...because it's..." The apprentice hunted for a reason. "It's death."

"Everyone dies."

"Except you," Jean Pierre countered.

Even I. "And you," the teacher said instead.

"So, if they're going to die anyway, why make their lives any shorter?"

"Because it is a permanent solution."

Young eyebrows furrowed briefly. Then his face cleared, as if another thought had occurred to him. He looked wide-eyed into LaCroix's face.

"No," the older man said.

"What?" Jean Pierre asked, confused.

"You were about to ask a 'question'. I don't feel like a major discussion at the moment."

Jean Pierre pulled back a little. "Can you read my mind?"

As you do mine? "Would you want me to?" the teacher countered.

"I don't know. But you do seem to know what I'm thinking most of the time."

"Perhaps because you allow it."

"Allow it?"

"Yes. In fact," LaCroix said, starting to walk further down the beach, "if it weren't for Shabot, I would say that you are much too open."

"What does Shabot have to do with anything?" Jean Pierre wanted to know, following his master.

"Much too much, in truth. But I was referring to your manner with him. It's something like comparing fire to ice. As guileless as you are with me, you are politic with him."

"Politic?"

"Careful," the teacher smiled.

"I'm careful with you."

"Are you?"

"For different reasons, yes."

"And they are?"

"Mainly that you never regret choosing me."

So, even now, the young man worried about that. "I cannot tell the future, Jean Pierre. But at this point, I doubt very much if that will happen."

"At this point," the apprentice nodded. "I remember how Shabot looked when he found out I was staying with you."

"Do you also remember how he attacked you?"

"I'm not so sure I wouldn't do the same thing, if you found someone to replace me."

"No," the older man said with conviction. "You are not a replacement. Certainly not for Shabot, and not for those who came before you. And while there may be others who come after you, and it is possible they will exist, they will never supplant you. You are..." LaCroix paused, frowning.

"What is it?" the apprentice asked.

"I don't remember," the older man almost smiled. "And I've always been cursed with too good a memory."

"How can...?"

"Because memory isn't selective. You can't choose to remember only certain events." The teacher shook his head. "And now, I can't recall an insignificant Baltic word of all things."

"Is it from that long ago?"

"Long enough. Let us head back." LaCroix turned. The young man came obediently behind.

"How long?" the apprentice asked.

"Over two hundred and fifty years."

The young man made a face. "Just how old are you?"

"Jean Pierre, it isn't socially acceptable to ask such things. It's too personal."

The apprentice nodded in silence.

"I'm approximately two hundred and sixty-four," the teacher said.

"Approximately?"

"It was hardly a day of special remembrance for my mother. I was born in 1584. Probably in the spring."

"But you have to have a birthday."

"So I've been told," LaCroix sighed.

"Lorraine?"

The older man nodded, "Yes, Lorraine. My lady teacher was adamant when she heard. So, she appointed me a birthday."

"Good," Jean Pierre approved.

The master shrugged.

They walked through the town and up to the stairs of the hotel.

"So," said the young man, "when is your birthday?"

"It's not a true date, Jean Pierre. It's hardly worth mentioning."

"Lorraine remembers," the apprentice countered.

LaCroix sighed. "Lorraine remembers. Very well, March 14th."

"I'll remember."

"Jean Pierre, I want no foolishness about this," the teacher admonished as they approached their rooms.

"Okay."

LaCroix glared at the blank expression. "You keep telling me that you are not innocent. Therefore don't use that naive face on me."

"It's the only face I have."

The older man frowned at the younger.

"I will remember," the apprentice insisted. Jean Pierre closed the door to their suite behind them.

"There will be no gifts. Is that understood?" the master said clearly.

"But I..."

"Understood?"

The young man closed his mouth and refused to look at his teacher.

"I want your promise, Jean Pierre."

"I will..."

"Your promise." When his apprentice remained silent, LaCroix lifted the other's chin. "Promise," the master repeated.

"No."

The older man moved his hand to encircle the bare throat. He looked deep into blue eyes. "Promise," he ordered.

"No," Jean Pierre said weakly.

LaCroix delved deep into the young man's mind. He had every intention of compelling the obedience. He soon found the kernel of his young friend's resistance. It was a fragile thing, small and defenseless. It was also embedded deep in the frame work of Jean Pierre's personality.

The teacher hesitated. He could easily destroy this minor defiance. But what would become of Jean Pierre? Was obedience in regard to something as inconsequential as a birthday gift worth the risk of losing his young friend forever?

LaCroix withdrew.

He became aware of Jean Pierre still staring wide-eyed at him, his breathing shallow. As the teacher broke mental contact, he caught the young man against him.

His apprentice gasped and shuddered as consciousness returned. "You were...going to...force me," the young man trembled.

"Yes." LaCroix made no effort to excuse or disguise the fact.

"I didn't think...that could be done among our own kind."

"Some can," the teacher shrugged, moving into the parlor.

The two men discarded their cloaks.

"You can."

"Yes."

Silence. The rooms were quiet. Denis and Gabrielle had not yet returned. They had perhaps an hour to do so, the older man noted.

"Why did you stop?" Jean Pierre asked.

The two men entered the apprentice's bedroom.

"What makes you think I did?" the teacher asked calmly.

"Because..." the young man considered. "Because I still remember. And I still want to do something for your birthday. You could have made me forget it all, couldn't you?"

"Oh, yes."

The young man studied him. His expression was of curiosity rather than fear. "Can I do that?" he asked.

"To me? No."

Jean Pierre waved that answer aside as irrelevant.

"To anyone else?" the teacher deliberated. "A mortal, yes." Of that LaCroix was sure. "Another immortal? ...It's very possible."

"I can?"

"It's not something I would recommend you trying without a need to, just yet. But, yes, I believe so. You are very new to the Life as yet, Jean Pierre. Not even a year. The fact that you could resist me at all is significant."

"But you still could have compelled me."

"At the moment, yes. I could crush your mind like a grape. Later? In five years, maybe ten, possible not."

"I could stop you?" The young man was skeptical.

"I don't foretell the future, my friend. But I believe you do have the potential, yes. Regardless," he went on quickly, "you need to learn to protect yourself. There are not many who can compel their will on us. You must learn to shield your mind from them."

The apprentice sat on his bed. "Is it like when we don't want anyone to know that we're there?" he asked.

"It's the same idea but a different technique. Right now, however, I want you to remove the rest of your clothes."

"Huh?"

The look of complete bafflement was comical.

"I wish to make sure," LaCroix smiled, "that your 'woman artist' didn't do any more damage to you."

"She didn't," the young man said, shucking out of boots and trousers. "I stopped her before she could."

"That isn't quite accurate, is it?" the teacher said, pointing to an abrasion that disappeared into pubic hair.

"Well, considering that she was aiming for my testicles at the time, it doesn't really count."

"Doesn't it?"

"No," the apprentice said stubbornly.

A door slammed.

"Denis and Gabrielle," Jean Pierre said, listening.

The teacher nodded. "With not too much time to spare." Denis would be so informed. "To bed," the master said briskly to the young man.

"Is that an order?"

"Does it have to be?" LaCroix asked slowly.

The apprentice grinned. "Since I'm about ready to start snoring now," he said, pulling back covers and crawling into bed, "I don't guess so."

The older man waited until blue eyes fluttered closed, then left the room. On the way to his own rooms, he only nodded toward the two mortal servants.

He slept.

* * *

The teacher woke at the next sunset to find Gabrielle frantically waiting by his bedside.

"M. LaCroix, please, wake up," the girl pleaded.

Leisurely, the master eyed the anxious face.

"Please, sir."

"What are you doing here?" he asked with deceptive calm. No mortal was allowed in his sleeping chamber.

"Denis said to fetch you."

The teacher sat up in no particular hurry. Denis knew the rule well enough. "Why?" the master asked. "Where?" he added as an afterthought.

"Jean Pierre's room."

Quickly, the older man left the girl and his room behind. He crossed the main parlor to his apprentice's room. He found the manservant hovering over a thrashing Jean Pierre.

"I was afraid to wake him," Denis said worriedly.

"Wait outside," LaCroix instructed.

"Can I help?"

"Close the door," the teacher said firmly.

"Yes, sir," the servant said reluctantly.

Denis turned on his heel and took a fearful Gabrielle with him to wait in the main room.

The master stepped up to the restless man on the bed. "Jean Pierre," the teacher called, softly. "Open your eyes."

The apprentice sobbed, still firmly entrenched in his vision.

"You can hear me, Jean Pierre," the master said gently. "You have only to open your eyes and the memory will cease." LaCroix avoided a flying arm. "Look at me, Jean Pierre."

The young man continued to ignore him.

"Open your eyes," the master repeated. "Now!"

Blue eyes opened, but the fear was still bright in them for several moments to come. LaCroix sat on the edge of the mattress. But he made no attempt to touch the shuddering figure. The young man wrapped his arms around himself.

"It's over," the teacher said in silken tones. "You're safe."

"...I know." Jean Pierre sagged against the master's left arm. Only then did the older man encircle the trembling figure. The apprentice didn't cling to him, but he didn't move away, either.

"Tell me something," the master said.

The young man looked at him silently.

"Why didn't you call me that night?" the teacher asked.

"...Call you?"

"I should have known that you were in trouble. By way of mind-speech, if naught else. But there

was nothing. I heard...nothing."

"I...I didn't think of it."

"I should have felt your fear, Jean Pierre."

"I wasn't afraid, at first," the young man explained. "By the time I realized what was happening, it was...happening." He sighed. "I was angry more than anything."

"That anger possibly saved your life."

"That anger killed three people."

"Three of the five who were trying to kill you. Surely, you don't doubt that you were justified,"

LaCroix reproved.

"I don't know what else I could have done."

"Other than killing them all myself," the teacher said, "neither do I."

Jean Pierre sighed, resting his head against the master's shoulder. "Do you believe in God, Misha?"

So there it was. A question. Possibly the question.

LaCroix said, "God doesn't require my belief to exist, Jean Pierre."

"Then you do believe." The young man lifted his head.

"No. Belief implies some doubt, however small. God is there."

The apprentice straightened. He canted his head to one side, as he looked at his teacher. The fear was all but gone from his eyes. "How do you know, then?" he asked.

"I have only to look at the stars overhead, the rolling ocean, the fragile perfection of a flower. God exists, my friend. That's not belief. It's fact."

Thoughtfully, the young man folded his bare legs under him. "And an afterlife?"

"As in an immortal soul?" the master questioned.

"Yes."

"Of that I'm not so sure."

"Why is that?"

LaCroix considered his words carefully. "I find it easier to see the hand of God in nature than in the hearts of men...and women," he added, to forestall the apprentice's usual comment.

"But if we're made in God's image...?"

"And who is to say what that image is?" the teacher countered. "To say that we have souls like unto God, isn't that presumptuous?"

"But if we're created—"

"Enough. You pick a strange time for a theological discussion. Get ready to go out. I will do the same." The older man turned to go.

"Where are we going?" the apprentice called after him.

"Where do you want to go?"

Jean Pierre grinned.

Together, the two men said, "The beach."

"Very well," the teacher conceded.

"And can Gabrielle and Denis go with us?" came the young voice before the master could escape the room.

LaCroix frowned.

"Please?"

"If they are ready when we are, they may come," the teacher sighed. He made it out of the bedroom, but not before he heard a delighted, "Good," behind him.

Of course, they were all ready at the same time. The teacher had little hope of anything else.

As the four people made their way along the shore, they moved into pairs. The older man watched Denis gently guide Gabrielle several feet behind the two immortals. LaCroix approved.

His young friend, however, was oblivious to all but the curling surf.

"It's so huge," said Jean Pierre, looking out to the far horizon. "I can't hardly conceive of there being other lands beyond it, other countries, other peoples. How can it be so big?"

The teacher was silent.

"Can we fly over it?" the young man asked.

"Why not?"

"Then we can fly to America?"

"No."

"But you said...?"

LaCroix waved the protest aside, "The new world is very far away. Before we could reach it, the sun would come up and we would be caught and fried like so many tasty morsels."

Jean Pierre made a face. Then his attention was drawn by the sound of laughter. They turned to see Denis trying to lead a highly resistant Gabrielle into the rippling waves. The apprentice stared at them.

LaCroix smiled.

The young man stared at the water, then at the wading servant, and then at his feet.

"Go ahead," the teacher urged.

Jean Pierre frowned and pulled off his boots. But stepping into the rippling surf was another matter. The apprentice avoided the wave as it reached for him.

"It doesn't bite," the master offered from his position well clear of the tide.

Grimly, Jean Pierre took a step forward. He gasped as the water swirled around his ankles.

"You see?" the teacher said.

"It feels strange."

"It should. The sea is possibly the greatest single force on this planet."

"Is it?"

The apprentice crouched to study the bubbling sand and water. He put out his hand and watched it run through his fingers.

"I have heard it said that ocean water is very similar to blood," LaCroix went on.

Before the older man could even consider the possibility, he saw Jean Pierre drink deep of the water in his cupped hands. Patiently, he waited until his apprentice stopped the violent coughing and spitting. The master fully expected the glare that came his way when the young man was silent once more.

The teacher sternly controlled his face to quell the grin that threatened his features. "I didn't say it was a substitute," the older man said impassively.

"That," the apprentice grated out, "was dirty."

"That wasn't my intention," LaCroix countered coolly.

The two men stared at each other. The young face cleared.

"What was, then?" he asked.

"It was only meant to be a possible explanation as to why sea water feels the way it does."

Slowly, Jean Pierre nodded.

"Let the waters abound with life," the master quoted.

"That's what it feels like. Kind of. Like a lot of tiny lives. Is that possible?"

"Why not? God first called life from the water, didn't he?"

"The beginning and the end of the fourth day."

LaCroix smiled. "Yes." Abruptly, he called out, "Denis!"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you swim, by any chance?"

"Yes, sir!" the servant laughed.

"Then you have a student."

Two sets of stunned expressions stared at the master. One was happily expectant. The other was

shocked denial.

"You want me to swim in that?!" Jean Pierre demanded, as he waved at the expanse of ocean behind him.

"Yes."

"No," the young man challenged immediately.

"Skills are also knowledge, Jean Pierre."

The apprentice gazed apprehensively at the vast water. "But it's so big," he protested.

"You won't be swimming in all of it."

The young man glowered at his feet, still planted in the whorling sand. "Then you teach me," Jean Pierre said at last.

Not surprised, or even concerned, the master said, "No."

"But...."

"I never have enjoyed the sea. I would prefer you learn to swim in leisure from Denis, rather than pick up the disquiet I still feel whenever I have occasion to enter the water even now."

The manservant came near, leading Gabrielle on his arm. "I won't let anything happen to you, sir," Denis said.

LaCroix agreed, "Of that I am sure."

But the servant was too intent on his possible student to hear the threat.

Jean Pierre scowled.

"You can leave your clothes with us," the master said. "Gabrielle and I will keep guard."

"I don't want to do this," the young man stated clearly.

But you will. The teacher waited.

Denis was already casting aside his clothes. "It's fun," the mortal told his young master. "You'll like it."

Jean Pierre eyed LaCroix. "Will I?" he asked skeptically.

"I believe so," the older man nodded.

Slowly, the apprentice took off shirt and trousers. He took a deep breath and walked into the rippling liquid. Denis scrambled after him.

"Are they really going into the ocean?" asked a timid voice.

"Yes, Gabrielle," the master said, not looking away from the two men moving into deeper water.

"Denis said that it's bigger than all of Claudette's house...and the gardens."

"So it is."

LaCroix noted Denis turning the apprentice so the waves would come at their backs. Even then, a roller caught Jean Pierre unprepared and knocked him over. But the servant quickly caught him and put him, sputtering, on his feet.

The teacher didn't move. But his eyes didn't leave the swimmers.

"Are they all right?" the girl asked.

"They're fine."

The two men went further out. The next wave went harmlessly under the apprentice as he closely followed Denis' timing to jump the swell. It was an apparent surprise to the young man, the teacher saw. It also gave Jean Pierre some confidence.

"How far have they gone now?" Gabrielle asked.

"Close to a hundred feet," LaCroix answered absently.

And still the two continued to move out even more.

"But it gets deeper, doesn't it?" the girl asked, worriedly.

"Yes."

"But what will they do when they can't touch the ground and keep their heads above the water?"

"They can't touch now."

Two heads floated on the surface, gliding over each crest. The master controlled his unease. Jean Pierre's laughter could be heard. But the teacher found little comfort in it. There wasn't much consolation in the fact that Denis stayed close to him.

"How can we...?" Gabrielle began.

The teacher paid no further attention to the girl's babbling. Denis disappeared into the sea briefly. He came up again even more distant to the shore. LaCroix could barely hear his apprentice's questioning shout. The young man wasn't turned toward the land but to the steadily distancing servant.

Denis was caught in the undertow, the older man realized. Despite the vassal's obvious protests, Jean Pierre paddled out to him. *Which means they both are caught.*

Without thinking, the master flew out over the water, leaving a nearly hysterical Gabrielle behind. Denis was tiring. The apprentice was stubbornly keeping the servant haphazardly afloat. The young immortal did not lack the strength, but he did not have the knowledge of what to do.

The teacher scooped Jean Pierre out of the brine, only incidentally bringing Denis along, by way of his apprentice's grip on the mortal. LaCroix deposited both men on the beach. He left the coughing servant to Gabrielle's frantic ministrations.

Jean Pierre spat out some salt water. "It is not a substitute," he hacked out. "Denis?"

"Will be fine," the teacher assured him. "Although he won't enjoy it for a while."

They watched a sputtering Denis try to reassure a sobbing Gabrielle.

"I'm...okay, Bri," the servant gasped.

"But you could have died," the girl protested.

"I didn't. Jean Pierre kept my head above the water...pretty much," Denis conceded in a raspy voice.

"I think you need to teach me more about swimming," the apprentice frowned. "I probably almost drowned you myself."

"Yes, sir," the servant grinned crookedly. "But I'm alive. You learned enough. This time."

"Next time," LaCroix put in, "it might be wise to learn yourself when not to go out too far."

"Yes, sir," the manservant nodded seriously. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank Jean Pierre. It was his hold on you that saved you," the older man shrugged.

"And I do thank you," Denis said to his young master. "Most heartily. But thank you," to LaCroix, "for not pulling him free. I know it would have been easier to save him without me."

The teacher approved. Denis understood that LaCroix's concern was only his apprentice. The servant accepted it for the most part. The older man glanced at his young friend to find him waiting expectantly.

"That's true," the teacher said. "It would have been. But Jean Pierre has regard for you. That gives you a certain value to me as well."

"Yes, sir," Denis nodded.

"Thank you for me, too," said Gabrielle.

//And me, came Jean Pierre's thought.

LaCroix managed not to smile. But he knew his apprentice sensed his pleasure just the same.

Denis was shivering violently now, even though the girl had wrapped him in his cloak. It reminded the teacher that it was November and perhaps a bit cool for mortal flesh. The weather was chilly for a night time swim.

"Shall we return to our rooms?" the master suggested.

"Yes, please," said Gabrielle. "They're both freezing."

The two men pulled on their clothes. Herding the three others in front of him, the master followed. They made progress back to the hotel.

LaCroix heard them before he saw them.

Four men. Mortal. Relatively quiet. Very dirty. They also moved with some assuredness, like

those having done this act many times before. So the older man was hardly astounded when the strangers appeared out of the darkness, even when they waved knives and a sword in front of LaCroix's small group.

"We want your money," they were informed.

Jean Pierre evidently had not sensed them beforehand. But the teacher was startled by the young man's reaction.

"You again," the apprentice greeted with some amount of disgust. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"What?"

The master put in calmly, "Do you know these people, Jean Pierre?"

"I know them a lot better than I ever intended to." To the bandits, "Go home, why don't you?"

"It's that dandy from the other night," said the tallest of them.

"When was that?" LaCroix asked.

"Ah..." one said, trying to think.

"What do you care?" another snarled. "Give us your money. And jewelry."

"They ain't got any," said the Thinker, looking the four of them over.

"Aristocrats always got money. They're hiding it."

"We're not hiding it and we're not carrying anything," Jean Pierre informed them. "So get out of here."

"You think that we believe you?" the apparent leader demanded.

"I don't care what you believe. Just leave us alone."

Another of the thieves spoke up, "Where did you go, anyway?"

The teacher noted that he wore a shirt with one sleeve longer than the other.

The apprentice grimaced. "I disappeared in a puff of smoke and sulfur. Didn't you notice?"

"Sulfur?" the Thinker questioned.

The master watched the intruders, especially the leader who had the one sword among them.

The weapon was old and worn from hard usage. But it was evidently sharp and well cared for. It was also held in a very steady hand. LaCroix doubted that this ragged thief was an accomplished swordsman. But since the blade was aimed at Jean Pierre's mid-section, a certain amount of caution was indicated.

His apprentice, on the other hand, seemed to be ignoring the weapons, waving and otherwise. Was he oblivious to them? Or perhaps trying to draw their owners' attention away from the two vulnerable mortals in their company.

Denis, for his part, was trying to shelter Gabrielle behind him. The girl, surprisingly, was quiet and still.

The bandits had been trying to move around them. But in the narrow alley, the teacher stepped instinctively with his back to the wall nearest him. The manservant did the same, putting the compliant girl between him and the opposing wall. That left Jean Pierre occupying the center space, as he nattered along.

The master was about to put an end to the tenuous situation when the Thinker lunged for Denis.

"I know him," the man announced.

The servant avoided the grasping hand, pushing Gabrielle back with him. The apprentice blocked the pursuit.

"Leave him alone," the young man ordered.

"Talk to him later," the leader told his fellow thief. "We got more important stuff here." To Jean Pierre, "Just give us your money. And then we can all get back to what we were doing."

"You don't understand," the Thinker protested. "I seen him before."

"Hurrah for you," the apprentice snapped. "I've already told you we don't have anything. Let us go."

The Thinker began to sputter.

"Andy, shut up!" The leader turned back to Jean Pierre. "If you won't give it to us, we'll have to take it."

"But he's a whore!"

"What?!" came several voices.

"I remember seein' him around here a few years ago. He had a very rich 'friend.' These guys must have plenty of money to be able to afford him."

"We could have some real fun here," Sleeve offered.

"No," the apprentice said, knocking away his arm.

"No," LaCroix agreed as he took hold of another wrist with a knife that had darted toward his young friend. "Drop it."

For a moment, the tall one just stared at him. Then he began to struggle, trying to escape. The teacher tightened his grasp and crushed the fragile bones. His prisoner groaned as the weapon went down.

"Let him go," the leader said. "Or I'll kill him." 'Him' being Jean Pierre.

Of course. The older man frowned. While the sword could do little permanent damage to the young man, short of cutting off his head, it would cause a significant amount of pain. The apprentice had been through more than enough of that in the last few months.

LaCroix hesitated.

Jean Pierre glared.

It was Denis who broke the stalemate. The servant ducked under the young man's outstretched arms and delivered a well placed kick to the leader's groin. In the melee that followed, Denis gave a remarkably good showing for himself. Gabrielle stayed sensibly quiet and still, next to the wall. However, Jean Pierre was more enthusiastic than effective.

No matter.

The thieves were disarmed and disposed of by way of a few more broken bones, a smashed knee cap, and one ripped out throat.

LaCroix held the old sword now, considering what to do with it. The leader stood quietly, holding his broken arm against his chest. The rest of the gang had run, or hobbled, away, leaving the one standing man and the one prone to cover their retreat.

The master really should, at least, break the blade.

The thief waited.

The teacher approved of the silence. No shallow promises of repentance or reform. No ridiculous stories of a treasured heirloom. Although the sword was obviously valued.

He tossed the weapon into the dirt to the thief's right side with its broken arm.

"If you ever," LaCroix said slowly, "come against me or mine again, you will not walk away."

The leader lowered his head in acceptance, his expression completely blank.

The near-victims walked away. Jean Pierre looked back, periodically, until they rounded a corner.

The four returned to their suite in silence, except for Denis' reassurances to Gabrielle that everyone was all right. LaCroix didn't bother to contradict him, despite the cuts that each of the men sported. The wounds were inconsequential.

They were all tired and relieved when they entered their sitting room...to find Shabot waiting for them.

The master felt the groans almost simultaneously even if they were done in silence. The vassal looked each of them over. Jean Pierre motioned the two servants to their room. Denis hesitated at the door. But the apprentice only nodded firmly that he go on. The servant shut the door.

"Why don't you go to bed, Jean Pierre," the teacher said. "You must be weary yourself."

"But I..." the young man protested.

//Later, LaCroix sent.

The apprentice stared at him for only a moment, then nodded and went to his room.

The teacher turned to the lone mortal in the room. "What do you want, Shabot?"

The vassal stepped forward. "Are you all right? The boy and the whore were..."

"I am quite well," the older man cut in. "Why are you here? And I warn you: I have been merciful once tonight. I'm not inclined to be again."

"I haven't seen you. I've missed you."

The older man grimaced. "You've had your family to occupy your time."

"Yes, sir," Shabot grunted.

Is it like that, then?

"May I stay here today?" the mortal asked.

"No."

"Please, sir."

"Shabot, you are here more by Jean Pierre's request than mine. If you wish to stay, ask him."

"But I..."

"Those are the terms, Shabot. Either comply, or get out!"

"Yes, sir," the vassal said meekly.

Slowly, very slowly, the mortal stepped to the apprentice's door. He knocked.

A surprised Jean Pierre opened the door. "Yes?" he said, with a glance at his teacher.

"He said," Shabot said clearly. "He said...I must ask you if I may stay here."

"Why me?"

"You wanted him here," LaCroix told him. "Then you deal with him."

The young man frowned. "Why aren't you with your kids? Your wife?" he asked the vassal.

"I've had enough of them. I want to stay here with him, with you all," he corrected hastily. "This is the only life I want."

"But what about your family?"

"They'll be fine. They always are."

And perhaps they were better off without him, LaCroix reflected.

"May I stay?" Shabot repeated. "I'll sleep with the whore and the girl."

"No," Jean Pierre said immediately.

What now? The master looked on, suspiciously. His apprentice was thinking of something.

"And his name is Denis," the young man said. "Use it." He stepped out of the doorway. "Take my room. I'll sleep out here."

"No," it was LaCroix's voice this time.

Jean Pierre and Shabot both looked at the master.

"He can't stay with Denis and Gabrielle," the apprentice explained. "If he stays out here, he'll be in the way. In my room, he'll have his privacy and so will the rest of us."

"Be sure, Jean Pierre," the teacher cautioned.

"I'm trying to be. I can't think of any other way."

"We could send him back to Paris."

Shabot looked suddenly afraid.

The young man nodded. "I know. But let's try it, first."

"It's on your head, then," LaCroix commanded.

"My head," the apprentice frowned. To Shabot, "Go get your things."

The mortal hurried from the suite.

Slowly, the teacher shook his head. "I don't think this is very wise."

"I don't think so, either. But..." The young man shrugged.

"Do you really intend to sleep out here?" the master asked.

"If it gets too awkward, I'll move in with Bri and Denis."

"I think not," the master denied. "Denis," he called.

The servant appeared immediately. "Sir?"

"I assume you've been listening," LaCroix said.

"Yes, sir," Denis admitted.

"Any comments?"

"I agree with you?" the manservant offered cautiously.

"Yes," the master sighed. "Go down to the manager and get a cot. We'll set it up in my room."

"Yes, sir," the servant grinned.

Had Denis been concerned about Jean Pierre being out here in the main salon and all too accessible to Shabot?

Denis set out. But the apprentice stopped him before the servant reached the door.

"It might be a good idea to tell Shabot that he's not to enter your room unless you invite him. In fact, it might be better if he doesn't, even if you do."

"Yes, sir. Thank you sir." The mortal waited for further instructions.

"Go," LaCroix told him.

"Yes, sir." Denis left.

The teacher turned back to the slim young man still standing in his doorway.

The apprentice sighed. "Do I know what I'm doing?"

"I doubt it very much," the older man said.

"Yeah." The young man looked sufficiently apprehensive.

"What did you want to talk about?" LaCroix asked.

"What?"

"Before we arrived, and you invited Shabot to stay with us, you seemed to have something on your mind."

"I didn't ask him to 'stay' with us," Jean Pierre denied. "I..." he began, at a loss for words. "I just...asked him to *stay* with us." The young man sighed. "Just how much trouble have I bought for us all?"

"You'll find out."

The apprentice groaned as he sat on one of the sofas. Absently, he rubbed at his arm and then his leg.

"You're going to need a bath," the teacher informed him.

"A bath? But I'm fine."

"In this case, the bath is to wash away the salt on your skin."

"A bath of water? Washing everything?"

"That is what a bath suggests. It's either that, or you will scratch for the next few days."

"Because I swam in the ocean?"

"The salts you tasted are on your skin. For comfort's sake, you should rinse off. Unless of course, you intended to make a habit of a daily swim."

"I did want to try it again. But it is..." The young man squirmed in his clothes.

Shabot returned then with a knock at the open hall door. "May I come in?" the man asked, carrying a stuffed tapestry bag.

"Jean Pierre?" LaCroix deferred.

"Go to your room and stay there."

"Yes, sir."

Before the vassal could close the bedroom door, Denis came back with the promised cot. Following him came several women carrying jugs of water and towels and a tub.

"It looks as if the decision has been taken out of our hands," said the teacher.

"I thought you would be itching like mad by now," the servant explained.

"Perhaps not to madness," the older man said, "but definitely to awareness."

"But I..." the apprentice protested, even as he scratched furiously at his shoulder.

Denis put the cot outside LaCroix's parlor door. He directed those with the brass tub and the rest to set everything down in the main sitting room, then he chased the strangers out.

The servant noticed Sabot still standing in the doorway of Jean Pierre's room. He turned away. "You will have to undress," Denis told his young master.

Jean Pierre didn't look at Shabot at all, even though he had to know he was watching. The apprentice shed his clothes and stepped into the tub. He started to sit down when the servant stopped him.

"Keep standing," Denis told him. "I'll sluice it over you."

"Yeah," said the young man, not sure of the idea at all.

Denis reached up high and began to trickle the water over Jean Pierre's head. The apprentice gasped and began to shudder.

"You said that you didn't feel the cold," the servant apologized.

"Just get it over with," the young man gritted out.

Denis sent a worried look at LaCroix. The teacher nodded.

The mortal began again, quickly pouring water over his shivering master. He quietly told Jean Pierre when to lift and move so he could rinse every inch of skin. Eyes shut tight, the young man obeyed.

The teacher watched the pattern of the liquid as it streamed over his young friend's bare limbs. Denis' intense concentration on each part of Jean Pierre's body was also noted.

The master resigned himself to locating some artist's materials. He had not intended to work at all during this celebration of Jean Pierre's recovery. But the ideas were becoming too intriguing to put aside any longer.

Tomorrow.

The older man spared a look at Shabot, who was gaping, still in the doorway, open lust in his eyes. But the vassal made no move toward the object of his lechery, even when Denis had put the finishing jug aside and wrapped Jean Pierre in a large blanket.

"I think," the young man shivered, "I think that was worse than the scratching."

"I'm sorry. If I had realized how cold it was, I would have—" Denis began.

"No. It's all right," the apprentice sighed. "It's over."

The servant rubbed the lean shoulders and arms in a vain effort to warm Jean Pierre up.

LaCroix turned away from the sight, ignoring the vague feeling of...jealousy. "Shabot?" he called.

"Yes, sir." The vassal almost fell in his haste to get closer.

"Set up the cot in my room," the teacher ordered.

"Yes, sir," the mortal said, hurrying to do the master's bidding.

Jean Pierre turned toward Denis. "What about you?" he asked, "You did some swimming, too."

The servant nodded. "There's still some water left." He indicated the last four pitchers. "Bri will help me after you go to bed."

"But I can help you now," the young man offered.

"Let it go, Jean Pierre," the teacher said. "It's late."

"Yes, sir."

Shabot returned to the sitting room. "It's all ready," he announced.

"Very well," LaCroix acknowledged. "In the future, you will not enter any room in this suite unless told to do so."

"Yes, sir," Shabot nodded.

"And you will not," the apprentice added, "go into Gabrielle and Denis' room at all."

The vassal looked at his master for confirmation. LaCroix gave him a clipped nod.

"Yes, sir," Shabot said with reluctance.

"Go to Jean Pierre's room."

In silence, Shabot went and shut the door this time.

"Come, Jean Pierre," the teacher said, leading the way to his own rooms.

The young man followed, still wrapped in the blanket. "Adieu, Denis," the apprentice called from the door.

"Adieu."

LaCroix closed the portal.

The master entered his small parlor, which led to an inner bed chamber. The teacher was not surprised to find that the senior vassal had set up the cot in this first room.

LaCroix turned to find his apprentice studying him. "I believe I said that Shabot was jealous," the teacher said. "Why did you let him watch, by the way?"

"It seemed kind of pointless to tell him not to. It's not like he hasn't seen me before."

"Perhaps you will give him pleasant dreams."

Jean Pierre sat on the cot and sighed, "If I thought they were pleasant, I doubt I would be as uneasy around him."

Good. It pleased the teacher that the young man was well aware of Shabot's potential.

"Now, again," the master said, "what did you want to talk about?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I think...I need...to learn how to fight."

"How do you mean?"

"Tonight I was working harder than you or Denis. But I wasn't accomplishing as much. The strength helps. It helps a lot. I wish I had had it before I met you. But there should be a better way of not getting bashed other than bashing heads yourself."

"Sometimes 'bashing heads' is exactly what's needed," the teacher shrugged. "But I do see your point."

"Will you teach me, then?"

"I think I will defer again to Denis."

"Why?"

"At least for now," LaCroix went on. "He and I have had a similar teacher, I believe: necessity."

"Well, you learned better than I did. I would have been more than happy to find a way to stop the beatings."

"Beatings?"

"Before I met you," the young man waved the subject away. "I told you I was a street kid."

"And you were hurt?" The older man reined in the growing thread of anger.

"A few times," Jean Pierre put off. He looked at the outer door. "What's that?"

The soft sound of Gabrielle's laughter could be heard.

"Most likely, Denis is getting his bath," said the teacher.

The young man got to his feet, leaving the blanket behind. He opened the door a few inches, LaCroix moving to stand behind him.

Denis stood in the tub now, rubbing his body as the water ran over him. Gabrielle, who was quite short, stood on a chair as she tipped the jug to a slow stream. She was giggling at the manservant's theatrical moans and complaints about the cold water.

"...Couldn't exactly bring heated water for me and then cold for Jean Pierre," Denis explained to the girl.

The overplayed reaction wasn't entirely faked. The teacher could see the man was shivering with goose flesh. LaCroix shut the door.

Thoughtfully, the young man returned to his new bed. "I want to try that," he said.

"You already have," the teacher said patiently.

"I mean the composition with Gabrielle and Denis. Now that was erotic."

"Perhaps," the older man conceded. "I was going to see about getting some charcoal and paper myself."

"Were you?"

"There are a few ideas I would like to get down."

"Denis and I can get it tomorrow."

LaCroix nodded. "Very well. Now lay down so I don't have to pick you up off the floor."

"Yes, sir," the young man grinned. "Yes," he corrected when he saw the teacher frown. He lay back and stretched, his arms behind his head. He fell asleep before he could move them down again.

LaCroix covered the nude body with a dry blanket. Then he went to his own bed.

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The next evening, the older man got up and set about changing his clothes. By the time he was ready to approach the door to his personal sitting room, he heard voices.

Jean Pierre and Denis.

The teacher entered the small room to find the servant looking on, while the apprentice put on shirt and trousers.

"Denis solved the problem of how I was going to get my clothes out of Shabot's room," the young man announced.

"Your room," LaCroix corrected.

"Yes, sir," the apprentice nodded, pulling on his boots. "I'll have to make sure I gather up my clothes before I go to bed in the future."

"I'll do it," the servant spoke up.

Jean Pierre smiled. "Okay. Between the two of us, somebody should remember."

"Somebody will," the teacher said clearly.

"Yes, sir," this time from Denis.

"Do you want me to go to the market first?" the young man asked. "Or do I get my lesson first?"

"The market. It will give me something to do while you spar with Denis."

Suddenly, the manservant looked very interested in the conversation.

"The market it is," Jean Pierre agreed. "What about Gabrielle?"

"She will stay here. Send her to me before you leave."

"Yes, sir."

The two young men left.

The teacher set about moving the cot into his bedroom.

"M. LaCroix?" came Gabrielle's soft voice.

"Come."

The girl entered the sitting room, following her hand along the wall.

"I assume you are aware of the new arrangements?" he asked, sitting himself on a lounge.

"Yes, sir. M. Shabot is in Jean Pierre's room."

"We can only hope that my apprentice will come to regret his decision quickly."

Gabrielle was silent. But the older man could sense her agreement.

"Jean Pierre will be sleeping in my room until he does change his mind."

"Yes, sir," she nodded as if to say, *Of course. Where else would he sleep?*

LaCroix approved. "Regardless of the number of occupants, you will not enter my bedroom."

"Yes, sir."

"This also applies to Shabot. I will inform him myself. But in case he should 'forget,' you may

remind him."

"Yes, sir." She was apprehensive now.

"Does Shabot frighten you so?"

"Yes, sir. If I let him."

Ah, so she is aware that her fear is self-defeating. Good. "Then you must not let him," the teacher said simply.

"I try, sir. But he likes to tease."

"About your blindness?"

"Partly," she said hesitantly.

"And because of Denis."

It wasn't really a question. Shabot would be convinced that she was harlot to a harlot.

"Partly," came the quiet reply.

Partly? "What else?" LaCroix asked.

"Jean Pierre."

"What about him?"

She was openly reluctant to speak now.

"Tell me, Gabrielle," he commanded.

"He thinks, Shabot thinks," she corrected hastily, "that we...the three of us, Denis and me and Jean Pierre..."

The older man waited patiently.

"...That we all...have sex together and..."

"And what?" Patience was not always a strong point.

"And that you watch...sometimes."

"Meaning, perhaps, that I indulge myself with the three of you," the teacher worded carefully.

"Yes, sir."

It would seem that Shabot has more of an imagination than I realized. "I see," he said quietly.

The girl was visibly shaking, her hands clenched tight at her waist.

"What do you think, Gabrielle?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"About what?" She was confused.

"About us being lovers, of course," he said, lifting her chin.

"I know it's not true," she quavered out.

"But it could be."

Terrified, she shivered, "Yes, sir."

LaCroix touched her throat as he grinned. "And Jean Pierre and I," he whispered. "Are we lovers?"

"I..." She swallowed. "I don't know."

"Don't you?" he said in a silken voice.

"I..." Her words faltered. "I know that he loves you."

"Does he?" LaCroix murmured, palming her sweet pulse.

"Yes, sir," she said firmly. "Very much. The sex, it doesn't matter when someone loves you like that."

LaCroix laughed. "Oh, it matters, Gabrielle. It matters very much." He stepped back.

The girl went almost limp with relief.

The teacher returned to the chair. "Where is Shabot now?" he asked.

"In Jean Pierre's room. He wanted to come out."

"And you refused him?" he asked, surprised.

"Well, sir, we didn't think we were the ones to tell him."

Really? "Possibly not," the master conceded. "But I can't help but wonder if you weren't simply reluctant to give that permission."

"Yes, sir. We were reluctant."

The teacher considered. Claudette had taught these two well. Honesty, although painful, could be life-saving, whether they knew it or not.

"Do you carry a knife?" he asked abruptly.

"No, sir," she answered anxiously. "Claudette didn't allow it. Only Chusot could have weapons."

"Ah, yes, Chusot," the master remembered. The house guard had the build of an elephant and the mind of a child, a child who could wield a knife like a surgeon.

"Has Denis...?" LaCroix began. Then he heard the outer door open.

Jean Pierre. And the servant, who seemed to arguing with his young master. The teacher passed by Gabrielle to find the two young men still standing in the entrance hall to the suite. The apprentice was pointing to his room. Denis struggled to keep silent.

LaCroix glanced at that door. It was unseen from the anteway. He found Shabot there, listening. The master promptly turned back to his apprentice.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Yes," said Denis promptly.

"No," said Jean Pierre.

"What happened?" Gabrielle blurted out from behind the teacher. "Are you all right?"

"There was a man..." the servant began.

"We are fine," the apprentice said firmly. Then he shook his head and pointed again where he knew LaCroix's vassal was standing.

"Shabot!" the master called.

"Yes, sir," the blond man said, appearing around the corner.

"Get out. Now."

"But—"

"But?" LaCroix asked, calmly eyeing the other.

"Yes, sir," Shabot said hastily. "I'll go...and return in an hour?"

"In three hours," the teacher said arbitrarily.

"Yes, sir." The vassal left in a hurry.

Deliberately, the teacher folded his arms and waited as he studied his apprentice.

Jean Pierre frowned as he carried his package to the table. He looked out the glass doors to the balcony. Behind his back, Denis fidgeted worriedly. Gabrielle silently made her way to the manservant.

LaCroix waited.

"There was a man," the apprentice began, "at the market."

"One of many, I assume," the master said, by way of encouragement.

"Not like this one," Jean Pierre answered without turning.

Out of the corner of his eye, the teacher saw Denis nod.

"He was tall," the young man went on, facing him at last. "Six-foot-four, maybe six-foot-six. Broad shoulders. Muscular. Chestnut hair, long, longer than yours. And deep eyes...like a sewer."

"An interesting description," LaCroix commented. "He seems to have impressed you."

The apprentice nodded. "He's one of us."

"Is he?" LaCroix asked, vaguely alarmed. "Did you talk to him?"

"Yes, sir," Jean Pierre said absently. "I didn't notice him right away. I was looking for the paper and such. Then he called me."

"Did he know your name?"

"No," the apprentice said with certainty.

It was something, the master noted.

"He said something about us being kindred spirits," the young man shrugged, "which, I guess, we are."

Denis stepped forward. "I saw him from across the room. I knew right away that he was like you. Only...he wasn't like you."

"How so?" LaCroix questioned.

"Just...different," the servant said helplessly.

"Thank you so much for your accurate account," the teacher said sarcastically.

"Old," Jean Pierre said suddenly. "Much older than anyone I've met before."

The master turned away, thinking. It was true that some of the People did seem to give evidence of their age. Usually, it was synonymous with power. They were also very, very few in number.

"It was smothering," the apprentice said softly.

"What was?"

"The...radiance he put out. It made you want to forget to breathe."

"A gladiator," Denis spoke up.

"A what?" the teacher demanded.

"He reminded me of a gladiator. I saw a painting once of one," the servant explained. "He was circling his opponent, ready to slit the other one's throat. He was doing that with Jean Pierre. I knew we had to get out of there."

"And yet you stayed long enough to get the supplies," the older man frowned.

"It's what we went for," the young man shrugged. "He didn't do anything, or say anything, really. He just felt..."

"Dangerous," Denis supplied.

"Did he perhaps give you a name?" LaCroix asked.

"No," the apprentice answered. "Do you know him?"

"Probably not. Possibly not," he said, trying to sound indifferent.

Duran. The name echoed in his brain. "We'll go out later and perhaps you can point him out to me," LaCroix said calmly.

If it was Duran, the teacher would not need any confirmation other than being in the same area. If it was Duran, and that ancient immortal had taken an interest in Jean Pierre, this holiday could all too easily become a disaster.

"But for now," the master said briskly, "you two," he nodded to the two young men, "will commence with your lessons, and I will get on with my work."

"And me?" Gabrielle asked.

"You may either go to your room, or sit out here with us," LaCroix shrugged.

"Thank you, sir."

She went to their room. LaCroix barely noticed when she returned carrying her crocheting as he set up a place at the table.

"Are you ready?" he asked Jean Pierre and Denis.

The two men had been talking. They pushed most of the furniture in the sitting room off to the sides.

"If you're going to draw us, you'll want us nude, won't you?" Jean Pierre asked with a glance at the girl.

The teacher asked bluntly, "Gabrielle, does nudity offend you?"

"No, sir. It doesn't mean much at all to me."

LaCroix looked at his apprentice. "Well?"

"Okay, okay. So I'm not any more reasonable about nakedness than anyone else. Do you want us to undress?"

"For now, no," the master said. "Since your opponent's clothes can be used against him, you

might as well start there. I'll let you know when I want you to change."

The teacher sat down and began to draw. Occasionally, he looked up to see how the lessons were progressing. Time passed quickly. He was almost surprised when Shabot reappeared.

Since LaCroix had little use for watches, he didn't bother to check the time. The added inches to the shawl Gabrielle was working on confirmed the passage of a respectable period. He waved the senior vassal over to a corner and then to silence. After another half hour, he put aside his drawings.

"Are you ready for a break?" he asked the two wrestlers.

"Yes, sir," Denis panted.

"Are you tired?" Jean Pierre asked.

"Very," the servant laughed.

"But why didn't you say something?" the young man asked.

"Because I was having fun."

"Jean Pierre," the master reproved.

"I know. I know. I should have been paying closer attention."

LaCroix shook his head. That was not what he meant. His apprentice was far too concerned about these two mortals.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Jean Pierre asked.

"Very sure," Denis grinned. "Can we go now?"

"Go?" the young man asked.

"Back to the market to find that guy."

"Oh, yeah."

The two young men turned to LaCroix. So did Shabot.

The teacher studied his latest drawing, not seeing it. He did want to know if Duran was here, if it was Duran. Would Jean Pierre be safer here in their rooms? Of course if Duran was really looking for him, the young man would be defenseless and alone. Gabrielle would certainly be no help. Or Shabot. Or Denis. No, better to keep him with LaCroix.

But when the five of them, two immortals and three mortals, returned to the market, there was no sign of the tall stranger. Even the shopkeepers seemed to only have a hazy memory of a muscular man. One clerk said that the nobleman had bought nothing and therefore was not of interest. The teacher could not help but wonder if the dark one had not bought something, or perhaps had not paid for something.

The small party returned to the suite where LaCroix sent the three mortals off to their rooms.

Jean Pierre followed the teacher out to his private verandah off of his bedroom.

"What did he say to you?" the master asked. "Precisely."

"I was looking through a stack of paper. It hadn't been sorted at all. I got a few sheets for me, too." The apprentice glanced at his master, his eyes asking if this were acceptable.

LaCroix nodded his assent to the implied question and motioned him to continue.

"He didn't say anything at first. But I felt someone behind me. When I turned, my eye level was just at his chest. It was like looking at a dark wall. He wore all black and alizarin. 'What have we here?' he said. He smiled. But there wasn't any warmth in it. His voice was whispery but harsh. Does that make any sense?"

"We'll worry about the sense later. Just tell me what happened."

Jean Pierre concentrated, trying to remember. "He called me a 'boy,' a 'young boy.'"

"And you said nothing?" the teacher questioned.

"I didn't know what to say. I am young...compared to you...and him."

"Did you think him older or younger than I?"

"I have no way of knowing. But older, I think."

"Go on."

“And who do you belong to, young sir?” he asked me.”

“And you said?” LaCroix questioned sharply.

The apprentice shrugged. “I said, ‘Why?’”

Pleased, the master asked nonetheless, “Were you trying to protect me?”

“No. I didn’t think it was any of his business.”

Good.

“But we are all kin,” he said. “Kindred spirits, are we not?” And then I... I can’t seem to remember what he said, until Denis was yanking at my arm. “Ah, so the pullet has a chick of his own. But where is the rooster?” It’s funny how those words are so clear, but the rest of it, I can’t...”

The man had tried to use mind control on LaCroix’s apprentice. It had obviously not been entirely successful or even the manservant’s presence would not have pulled Jean Pierre out of the trance. Duran or not, this newcomer was a threat.

“And then?” the teacher prompted.

“I got the paper and the charcoal. When I looked up again, he was gone.”

“And you didn’t see where he went?”

“No.”

LaCroix frowned. It didn’t have to be Duran. Unfortunately, it also didn’t have to not be Duran.

“Who is it?” the apprentice asked.

“I can’t be sure.”

“Who do you think it is?” the young man persisted.

The teacher glared at his young friend only a moment. “Go get the paper,” he said. “Draw him for me.”

“Okay.” Jean Pierre was gone in a second.

It shouldn’t be Duran. Yet if it had been Duran, that particular immortal had let the apprentice go. *Why?*

He was waiting. Or...he had other concerns.

“Who do you think it is?” the young man repeated, as he returned and sat himself at the master bedroom table.

LaCroix looked out to sea, gathering his thoughts. “I told you once that our kind seldom live much beyond three or four hundred years,” the master said finally.

“And you told me why,” the apprentice frowned, beginning to draw. “Suicide is such a waste.”

“So says someone with all the wisdom and weariness of twenty-three.”

“I may not be so old, but I’m not going to let you do it,” Jean Pierre countered.

“You think you can stop me?” the teacher mocked.

“I can sure try.”

“I may hold you to that, my friend,” LaCroix said softly.

“And I’ll remind you of it.”

The master stepped behind his friend as the young man drew. The rendering was poor. While the face was easily recognizable as human and male, it still only had a passing resemblance to the face LaCroix remembered.

Jean Pierre rubbed out the sketch with his fist. “I can’t seem to...” the young man said with frustration. “I don’t know why I...”

The teacher put a calming hand on a young shoulder.

“But I usually can remember better than this,” the apprentice protested.

“I am quite aware of your remarkable ability to draw from memory. It is possible that Duran attempted to make you forget everything.” *But he did not succeed*, the teacher noted.

“Duran?”

Ah, yes. Another question.

"As I told you," the teacher repeated, "four hundred is quite aged for us. But there are a few, a very few, that live beyond that. Duran, or at least the legend of Duran, is the oldest of us all. There are even tales that he is the first of us, but I find that difficult to believe."

"When was he born?"

"No one knows."

"And in legend?" Jean Pierre persisted.

"In legend, 254 B.C."

The statement had the desired effect on the apprentice's expression. But then the young man became thoughtful. "Then it could be true."

"What?"

"That he was a gladiator," Jean Pierre explained, "like Denis said."

"Possibly," the teacher shrugged. The master didn't feel like discussing all the stories about that particular Old One.

"Did you ever meet him?" the young man asked.

"No," LaCroix said abruptly. "Get ready for bed."

Obediently, the apprentice put aside his defunct drawing and began shedding his boots. But it didn't stop the questions. "Then why do you think that it's him?" Jean Pierre asked.

The teacher sighed. "I saw him once. Long ago."

"Once?"

"Like you, I found one time more than enough. That and the fact that he frightened Lorraine. I knew even then that anything that frightens that lady should be respected, at the very least."

"You were with Lorraine then?"

The master eyed the young man who stood barefoot and with open shirt as he peered at his teacher in turn.

"Yes," LaCroix said somewhat cautiously.

"Good," the apprentice said with satisfaction.

"And why 'good'?"

"Because that means you were with Lorraine sometime," Jean Pierre explained. "It doesn't seem like you spend much time with her now."

"I lived with her for almost two years. I saw her almost daily for four years after that. I've followed her for..." The teacher really didn't want to get in to this.

"More than two hundred years," the young man finished for him.

"It's not in Duran's league, of course," the master shrugged. "But still, it's been the better part of my life."

"Why did you stop? Staying with her, I mean."

"...I...killed two of her people. It wasn't the only reason for the break. But it did contribute. Finish getting ready." LaCroix turned away, pulling the outside drapes closed. Then he prepared himself for bed.

"What happened?" the young man asked. "When you first saw Duran?"

The master continued with his preparations. "It was at a party. The Lady Lorraine has always enjoyed large gatherings with their dancing and music and laughter. She was determined that I would enjoy them as well. Unfortunately, such things have always remained only so much noise for me—the music being only a marginal improvement over the laughter."

"But I've seen you dance with Lorraine," Jean Pierre protested.

"Have you?" the older man questioned, without stating the obvious, *You shouldn't have.*

The teacher pivoted to face the naked young man. The apprentice had the good grace to look embarrassed. For his admission.

"Yes, sir."

Good. Honesty was always a blessing, even as far as this young man was concerned.

"The reasons I dance with the lady," said LaCroix, "have nothing to do with social graces, Jean Pierre. At any rate, Duran came to the party. I saw him across the room, standing much taller than anyone else there."

"Did he see you?"

The teacher sat on the edge of his bed. "I couldn't say," the master said. "When Lorraine realized he was there, she pushed me out and away from the house."

"Then Lorraine knows him," the young man said, stepping up to the bedside.

"From what she told me of him, I'm not sure anyone knows him. But she certainly does better than I. He was an...acquaintance of her master."

"Oh?" the apprentice said, as he gently pushed the older man back on the bed and then straddled him.

"He's a dangerous man, Jean Pierre," the master said, trying, in vain, to ignore their positions. "Never try to ascertain just how dangerous. Keep away from him."

"I'll try," the other said solemnly.

LaCroix rested his hands on bare thighs. "Now then," he said. "Just what do you think you are doing?"

"I'm practicing," came the immediate reply.

The teacher studied him. "Oh?"

"Ravishing you," the apprentice grinned. "When we get home. Remember?"

"I see," the master said, sliding his fingers up slim hips. *Do you really understand what ravishment means?*

The apprentice laughed as he reached forward. The older man tensed. But then the other touched LaCroix's left temple.

//Show me Duran, // the young man asked with mind voice.

To the master's astonishment, he felt a gentle tendril touching his mind, touching and slowly seeping in. *Show him Duran, indeed.* The teacher formed a picture from his memory of that Ancient as he had seen him so long ago. A dark head loomed above a forgotten assemblage.

//That's him, // Jean Pierre sent.

The apprehension that Duran was in Trouville was offset by this new ability his apprentice was displaying.

//How do you do that? // the young man asked.

LaCroix was disinclined to tell him that the teacher wasn't entirely in control of what was happening.

//Show me Lorraine. The way you see her, // the apprentice asked.

That was easy enough. The teacher had only to choose any one of the number of ways he had seen her...with perhaps some discrete editing. *Bright angel.* So bright that he had been barely able to discern her features in that first brief glimpse before he succumbed to unconsciousness again. Reason told him later that the brightness was due to the nearby fire, where she had bundled him snugly. But even as he recovered and her face became more recognizable as a woman, he still associated her with angels. The first gentle angel he had known. He settled on the memory of her teaching him how to dance. The world had seemed wondrous with her laughter then.

//She's beautiful, // Jean Pierre sent.

//Yes, // the teacher agreed. *Enough of Lorraine. Let's see if Jean Pierre can see other memories.*

LaCroix selected a young woman of short stature, but fully rounded proportions. Gentle, pale eyes looked out of a dimpled face. A thick, gold braid fell down her back to her knees.

//Who is she? // Jean Pierre asked.

//Gerta. //

//One of your initiates?//

How had he guessed that? *//Yes,//* the teacher admitted. *//My first.//* LaCroix quickly switched to another image before what had happened to Gerta could form.

Another woman this time, tall and dark, as Gerta had been short and fair. No gentleness here. But an angular grace.

//Who?// came the expected question.

//Madeline.//

Another figure. Of a man this time. Young. Arrogant. Blond. Handsome. The image strode across the room, slowly disrobing until he stood naked before the viewer. Laughing, the man pivoted, sure of his attractiveness and his own sensual power.

//Gustav.// The mind voice reminded the teacher that Jean Pierre was also seeing this memory. With effort, the master held to picture, allowing the young man to see his forerunner for a few more seconds.

The image faded away.

LaCroix watched the apprentice astride his hips. His young friend still stared into nothingness, but a strange look of despair on his face.

//Why did you ever,// Jean Pierre sent, *//choose me?//*

"Because," the teacher said aloud, pulling down the dark head.

The young man focused on him.

"Because," LaCroix repeated, "as you are not Shabot, you are also not Gustav."

"But I...." The young man shook his head, freeing himself.

It was light outside now. The apprentice was fighting to keep aware.

"You are yourself," said the older man. "That is enough. Sleep now."

Jean Pierre only moved further down the master's body and then laid his cheek against LaCroix's breast. And slept.

The teacher glowered at the dark head for only a moment. Then he wrapped his arms across the bare back. And slept.

* * *

The older man opened his eyes when he felt movement.

Jean Pierre sat up, still perched across his body. The teacher's hands fell away, one to the outside, along the young man's calf, the other to the inside of the apprentice's thigh.

Jean Pierre paid no attention. "Teach me how you did that," he greeted.

"What?" LaCroix asked, striving to ignore the tickle of pubic hair against his knuckle.

"How I saw through your eyes. How I saw your memories."

The teacher studied the young face. Eager curiosity faded to puzzlement. "Move," the master said, withdrawing his hand from temptation.

He set the young man aside and got out of the bed. He splashed water into the basin and washed his face.

"Am I asking too much?" the apprentice asked.

LaCroix looked into the mirror just above the dresser. "Not so much," the master said, returning to his ablutions.

"Then what?" An answer occurred to Jean Pierre. "I'm impatient."

"You are that," the teacher agreed. "But that's not the reason. Clean up," he motioned Jean Pierre toward the wash basin.

Resigned, the apprentice stepped up to the water. "I hate this," he said.

"I know," the teacher moved out of the way. "Discipline, my friend. It is good for the soul. ...And it also prevents others from being able to smell you."

"A high price," the young man shivered as he doused his face and hands.

"Is it? When you are the one who complains about the dubious joys of your heightened sense of smell?"

Jean Pierre sighed and then rubbed at his face vigorously. "Do I always put my foot in it?"

"Not always," LaCroix smiled. "As for the other..."

The young man looked up from his clothes.

"I will most likely be happy to tell you how it was done when I have determined that for myself."

"But..."

LaCroix waved him to finish dressing.

"What you don't seem to realize, Jean Pierre, is how unusual you are."

"Me?"

"You. Mind speech alone is very rare, even among blood kin."

"Like you and me."

"Yes," the teacher nodded as he pulled open the drapes. "The bond between master and initiate can be very strong. But even that doesn't account for what you've done, mind speech included. You are the seventh of my progeny. You are the first and only one to speak to me so."

"But I've never even heard Jeanette. Only you."

"Jean Pierre, there must be at least two to have a conversation. It is quite possible that Jeanette is unable to send to you."

"Or she doesn't want to," the young man said quietly.

"That is also possible. I have made myself heard to all my initiates, and vassals, and even a few of the People. But I've only heard you."

"What about Lorraine?"

"Lorraine is another matter all together. We are discussing you. And you are quite remarkable."

The apprentice sighed. "I don't feel remarkable."

"What you feel changes nothing. Only what you are is important."

"And you."

"To me, yes," the master agreed.

"And to me."

LaCroix smiled. "As for the rest," he went on, "I know of no one who can do what you've done."

"But you did it so easily," the young man protested.

"Easily or not, I've only done it with you."

Jean Pierre became thoughtful as he sat on the bed. "I don't guess you'd want everyone traipsing through your head."

"Not even a few."

"Not even Lorraine?"

"No."

The young man stepped close. "Are you sorry?"

"No."

"Good. I'd hate to think you regretted calling me back from the dead."

"You weren't quite dead," the teacher corrected.

"Close enough," Jean Pierre shrugged.

"More that close enough. But still, I have never done it with anyone else."

"No one at all?"

"No one," LaCroix affirmed. "As I am unique in your life, you are certainly unique in mine."

The apprentice stared at him, wide-eyed. The older man could feel the pull of those blue eyes. But he held himself in strict control.

"Even so, it will probably serve us both to practice this new craft of yours," LaCroix said.

The teacher took hold of the young man's head, touching his thumbs to vulnerable temples.

LaCroix suspected this particular act of the apprentice served only to concentrate Jean Pierre's thoughts. But copying it did no harm, either.

"Show me your father," the master said softly. He felt the confusion that flooded the young man's brain.

"My...my father?"

//Yes.//

Jean Pierre closed his eyes. "It was so long ago."

//Remember.//

In the swirling haze that followed, a man took shape. He was tall and dark haired and laughing. But the man had no clear features.

//Remember,// LaCroix urged.

Another image formed. A face, at last, lying on a table, pale and bloodied, the jaw off-centered.

//My father,// came a wavery mind voice.

His father. Dead, from the carriage accident that took his life and left his family penniless.

The teacher withdrew.

Jean Pierre shuddered.

//It's the clearest—// he began.

"Silence," the master instructed aloud. "Put it from your mind. We'll try again another time."

"I'm sorry. I don't know how..." the young man began again.

"Enough. I want us to check the vicinity again for Duran. Then I will continue with my figure studies while you and Denis continue your wrestling." He gave a small smile. "In the nude, this time."

The apprentice nodded and finished dressing.

They left the bedroom to find Denis waiting in LaCroix's personal parlor with another change of clothes.

"Put them away," the master motioned toward the bedroom door. "Then come with us."

"Yes, sir."

LaCroix and his silent apprentice went on into the main sitting room.

"Shabot!" the teacher called.

"Yes, sir!" the man appeared almost immediately.

"You will check the southern part of town for Duran. If you find him, you will not get yourself killed, but return here to tell me. Understand?"

Denis joined them.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir," the senior vassal said.

"You will also tend to whatever personal matters you need. Meet me here in two hours."

"Yes, sir. I'm leaving now, sir."

"Gabrielle!"

"Yes, sir?" said the girl, opening her bedroom door.

"You have two hours to manage any business you might have."

"Stay away from Shabot and his family," Jean Pierre put in.

"Yes, sir," she said to LaCroix, adding, "I will, sir," to Jean Pierre.

"Let us go, then," the master ordered.

They searched the town and found nothing. But LaCroix could not be sure that Duran was truly gone or was merely absent for a while. He determined to check the area for the Old One each night for the remainder of their stay. But for now...

They returned to the suite and the wrestling-cum-figure studies.

The drawings were much better in the nude, the teacher noted, as he viewed the twining naked figures. The pleasure of watching Jean Pierre was only slightly dimmed by the possible specter of Duran. Even seeing Denis' more obvious appreciation of the apprentice was only of passing interest.

Shabot was another matter.

The teacher couldn't really say why the vassal's leering was, at best, distracting. LaCroix had already made a point of informing Shabot that if he ever touched the apprentice, the offending appendage would be amputated. And while the promise had encouraged the mortal to keep his distance, it had not dimmed the gleam of lust and envy in Shabot's eyes.

Jean Pierre simply ignored the man. That was possibly the best way to manage the situation. LaCroix doubted that Denis' barely concealed contempt, or Gabrielle's open fear, would lead to any lasting peace. The master himself kept silent watch.

He should have, perhaps, guessed how Shabot would direct his mounting frustration. But perhaps not.

They had been in Trouville over month. LaCroix had mentioned going south to Mont St. Michel. Jean Pierre was agreeable, possibly even more so when the teacher suggested that they send Shabot and his family back to Paris. The master had already decided to rid himself of his unwanted servant. If he didn't do so by temporary distance soon, he just might attend to it by way of a permanent solution.

The teacher and his young friend returned from one of their incessant walks along the shore. Jean Pierre had yet to grow tired of the ocean, making several drawings of the water movement.

They entered the suite to darkness and silence. Strange, because Denis and the girl had planned to stay the night in the rooms, giving the immortals some rare privacy. The two men listened.

"Hello?" the apprentice called.

There was someone here. The girl. In her room. Crying softly.

"Gabrielle," Jean Pierre called again, making his way to the servant's quarters to the left.

When they entered the room, it seemed empty at first.

But the girl was here. LaCroix noted with absent approval that his apprentice knew it, too, as the young man investigated every corner of the long room.

Gabrielle was hiding between the bed and the wall. She had stuffed the corner of the feather comforter in her mouth to stifle her sobs.

"What are you doing?" the young man asked, trying to dislodge the wad of bedding.

But the servant clung frantically to the quilt.

"Come on, Bri," Jean Pierre said gently. "What's the matter? Tell me."

LaCroix stood back and watched.

"Where's Denis?" the apprentice asked as he put an arm around the trembling shoulders. "Has he gone shopping again?"

Gabrielle shook her head violently, spitting out the soggy padding.

"...Sha..." she sputtered.

"What?" the young man questioned, slipping at last into hypnotizing speech. "What is it, Gabrielle? What's happened?"

"Shabot...has Denis," the girl hiccuped.

"What do you mean? Take a deep breath and tell me."

"He took him," she gasped.

"Shabot took Denis?" the apprentice asked sharply. "Where?"

"He was twisting my arm, and Denis hit him, and then he hurt him back, and he said he was going to hurt me, but..." There was a creeping edge of hysteria in her voice.

"Hush now. You're safe."

"He said he was going to sell me to a whorehouse, and make sure there were lots of men, and that

you'd never find me, and...."

"Gabrielle," Jean Pierre grated out. "Where is Denis?"

"I don't know," she wailed. "He took him, and he's going to hurt him, and Denis went with him so he'd stop hurting me, and he made me promise I'd stay here and say nothing."

"Who made you promise?"

"Denis," she sobbed. "He's afraid for me...and for you."

"Why me?" the young man asked, pulling her to her feet.

"He thinks Shabot wants to rape you."

Jean Pierre grimaced. "Do you think you can find him?" the apprentice asked LaCroix.

"Possibly."

"You stay here, Gabrielle," the young man told her.

"Let me come with you. I can help. If Denis is hurt, I can help."

The apprentice looked at the older man expectantly. The master shrugged.

"Try to find Denis," the teacher told him.

"Can I?"

"You should. Call him. With your mind."

They might as well turn this incident into a lesson of sorts. LaCroix was in no hurry to find his errant vassal. If something did happen to Denis, it would perhaps be regrettable. But only that. There were always other mortals, male or not, to take his place.

Jean Pierre closed his eyes, scowling with concentration. "Denis?" he called out in surprise. Then the young man frowned again.

"You found him?" LaCroix asked.

"I think so. He's tied up or something. He can't move."

"Did he hear you?"

"I don't know."

"Is he... Is he all right?" Gabrielle asked.

Jean Pierre shook his head. "He's hurt. I don't know how bad exactly. But he's in pain."

The three went out. Then guided by the apprentice's sporadic awareness, they walked through streets and back alleys. The teacher didn't try to locate Shabot. He was certain that the young man would find them eventually.

It took more than an hour.

By the time they entered the court yard of a chateau some distance from town, Jean Pierre was almost screaming with frustration. "Why can't I find him?!" the apprentice despaired.

Gabrielle was grimly silent.

"You will," said the master. "They're here."

"Where?" the young man demanded.

"You tell me."

"Misha, please!"

"Calm yourself. Think of Denis."

Resolutely, Jean Pierre closed his eyes.

"Picture him in your mind," the teacher told him. "Calmly. Quietly. Seek him out."

Slowly, the young man turned, his eyes still shut.

"Impatience serves no one, Jean Pierre," LaCroix said softly. "Now. Where is he?"

The apprentice looked up at a garret window. "There," he pointed.

"Yes," the teacher nodded. "They're all asleep in the house...except there."

"Gabrielle," the young man said hurriedly. "You'll have to wait here."

"No, please. Let me go with you."

Jean Pierre made up his mind quickly as he picked her up in his arms and left the ground. The

master followed.

"Quietly now," the young man whispered to his passenger.

The windows to the attic room had been heavily covered. Muffled sounds could be heard. Silently, Jean Pierre asked the teacher to open the largest window. LaCroix broke a small panel of glass, and turning the latch, lifted the pane. The apprentice set the girl inside. They found themselves in a bare wood room whose main furniture seemed to be only candles and mirrors.

They saw Shabot first, in a glass. The vassal was naked except for his boots. His attention was elsewhere in the room. He stroked himself with a wet riding crop.

"Where?" Jean Pierre whispered.

The teacher looked around a full length mirror that blocked their view. Denis, his face mashed against the far wall, was bound to wide spread coat hooks. His legs were anchored to heavy tables. Blood and sweat coated the nude body. The only cloth he had was a filthy gag.

"Once more, I think," came Shabot's smooth voice. "Then I'll dump you in the sea and let him find you then."

"Cut him down!" Jean Pierre said harshly. A stunned vassal turned to stare at them. "Cut him down! Now!" the young man spat out, stepping toward them.

Shabot looked at his master for instruction.

Or perhaps deliverance? LaCroix said nothing.

Denis didn't move. His breathing rattled loudly in the room.

"I said, cut him down," the apprentice repeated, stepping closer. But before Shabot could move, assuming he was about to, Jean Pierre double-fisted him into one of the many free-standing mirrors. The glass broke and splintered in a rain of fragmented light.

Shabot fell to the floor, but Jean Pierre was on him, frantically punching the soon unconscious mortal.

LaCroix watched for a few moments while his apprentice beat Shabot's head against the floor. The master ignored Gabrielle, who somehow found Denis and struggled with his bindings. Instead, the teacher moved forward to put a hand on Jean Pierre's straining arm as he began to strangle a limp body.

The apprentice, his teeth extended and face altered, glared up at the master. He tried to pull out of LaCroix's hold.

"Be sure," the teacher said clearly.

"What?!" the young man rasped out.

"Be sure this is what you want."

"I want," Jean Pierre turned back to the bloodied vassal.

"Do you want to kill him?"

"Kill?" The rage was still there, but now there was a vague element of stunned bafflement.

"Shabot's life means nothing," the teacher said calmly. "But will you regret your actions tomorrow?"

"Kill him?" the young man repeated.

"Only if it's what you want." LaCroix stepped back and waited.

Jean Pierre stared at the battered face in his hands. He let go. Shabot dropped like a stone.

Denis groaned. The young man looked up.

Gabrielle was pulling, ineffectually, at the ropes that held the servant to the wall. Jean Pierre stumbled to his feet and went to them.

Shabot didn't move.

The apprentice jerked the hooks out of the wall. Denis collapsed. The young man and Gabrielle caught and eased him to the floor. Jean Pierre then took up one of the broken pieces of mirror and sawed at the ropes that bound Denis' legs.

The mortal, once free, reacted slowly. He drew arms and legs into himself, as expected. But the

feeble movements accented the wounds that caused the blood smeared over his body.

Jean Pierre wrapped the beaten frame in his cloak. "We'll get you to a doctor," the apprentice said.

Denis groaned.

"It's all right," Gabrielle said, lightly touching his face.

The manservant mumbled something, but the swollen mouth and tongue refused to articulate clearly.

"Shabot won't hurt you any more," said the apprentice.

"...Ooo ocher..."

"What?" Jean Pierre questioned.

"No doctor," the girl explained. "He doesn't like doctors."

"But he has to..." the young man argued.

"I know what to do," Gabrielle explained. "...This has...happened before."

"And this time because of me," the apprentice said bitterly. He helped the injured man up. "Let's get him back to the suite." Then he looked at the master. "What about him?" with a guilty glance at Shabot.

LaCroix bent over the unconscious man. Shabot would live. "Leave him," the teacher said, straightening.

Jean Pierre nodded, accepting the decision. "Will you..." He motioned toward Gabrielle.

"I'll take care of the girl," the older man said. "Go ahead with Denis."

"Yes, sir." The apprentice carried the servant to the window and was gone.

LaCroix took a moment to plant some forgetfulness in Shabot's brain. "Are you ready, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, sir," she gulped.

"Do you know what's going to happen now?"

"We're going to fly again?"

"Does it frighten you, Gabrielle?"

"Yes, sir." But she stepped forward.

"Very well." LaCroix smiled as he picked her up.

By the time they touched down on the verandah to Gabrielle and Denis' rooms, they found Jean Pierre trying to wash the injured servant. The girl felt her way to the bed. The teacher remained by the door.

"I put him to sleep," the young man told the girl. "Tell me what to do."

"Turn him over," she instructed.

The apprentice complied.

Tiny hands glided over the bare back, lightly touching the assorted cuts. "Is he bleeding anywhere?" she asked as she checked Denis' legs.

"Everything seems to be stopped, except for his...his..." Jean Pierre faltered.

"His anus," the master supplied.

Gabrielle only nodded. She got up and went hunting through some of the stored trunks in the room. She pulled out of a small case. "I'll take care of him," she said.

"Let me help," the apprentice pleaded.

"It's better if it's me. I know what to do. I've done it before."

"Come with me, Jean Pierre," the teacher said.

"But I..."

"It's better if you go," Gabrielle agreed.

"She'll call us if she needs us," LaCroix said.

"You're sure?" the young man asked her.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll check with you later. ...I am sorry."

"It's not your fault."

"No," the master said. "It is not. Come."

Jean Pierre followed reluctantly.

"He'll be all right," the girl called after him just before LaCroix shut the door.

"Will he?" the apprentice asked.

"Probably."

"What about Shabot?"

"What about him?" the teacher asked, leading the way to his rooms.

"His wife has to be told."

"She will. Tomorrow."

"I can't just leave him there."

"Why not?" the master shrugged. "Shabot felt safe enough to take Denis there in the first place. He didn't think you'd be able to find him. He'll manage for another day."

"But..."

"You don't think the people who lived in that house didn't know Shabot was there? It is more than likely that they are related."

"Related?"

"Yes. Now, then. To bed. Or should I say 'cot'?" He pointed to the portable bed.

The apprentice sat. "I almost killed him," Jean Pierre said quietly.

"You did not," the teacher shrugged, as he got ready for sleep. "You chose not to."

Jean Pierre looked up at him. "Why did you stop me?"

"Because I knew that as guilty as you feel now, it would have been worse if you killed him."

"I've never felt so...very angry before, even when...it happened to me."

LaCroix watched his young friend undress. "It is possible that your reaction was partly due to your own experience," he said quietly.

"What? Why?"

"Because while you are very much aware of what happened to Denis, you are still not that sure of what happened to yourself. The men who tried to kill you are all dead and beyond your justice. Shabot, on the other hand, is known to you, very much alive, and all too accessible."

"So I took my revenge on Shabot?"

"Possibly. It's not as if the man is among your most treasured friends."

The apprentice curled his feet under him on the cot, and sighed, "So I tried to kill him."

"Again, you did not. Sleep now."

Despondent, Jean Pierre laid down on his bed and pulled up a sheet.

"Sleep," the teacher repeated as he stood over the young man.

The apprentice closed his eyes and slept.

LaCroix went to the main room and listened.

Gabrielle was still tending a sleeping Denis. The older man could hear the trickle of water as she wrung a cloth and rinsed the battered body.

The teacher left the suite.

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By the time LaCroix woke the next evening, he was dimly aware of Jean Pierre leaving the room.

The teacher took his time getting ready. He found his apprentice in the servants' quarters.

"...He didn't sleep well," the girl was saying. "And don't frown at me," she told Denis.

"Bri," Denis scowled.

"I am sorry," came Jean Pierre's voice.

The older man entered the room. Everyone looked at him.

"There's no reason for you to be sorry," the manservant said. "I went with him willingly. I thought I could do it."

"Do what?" the apprentice asked.

"Service him," Denis shrugged weakly. "It's what I know. But I guess it's been longer than I thought."

"Do you miss it?" the young man asked hesitantly.

"Not that!"

"But...the sex?"

The servant looked at LaCroix and then away. "Yes. Sometimes."

Jean Pierre shook his head.

"I know I can't, anymore," Denis said quickly. "I gave it up when I came to live with you."

"I forced you to give it up," the apprentice sighed.

"No. I wanted to come. When M. LaCroix told me to go to you, I wanted it. I wanted...you."

"But I can't..." the young man protested.

"I know you don't love me or want me or anything like that," the servant said sadly. Denis swallowed painfully.

"Be still," Gabrielle cautioned.

The manservant patted her hand. "I know," he said hoarsely. "What about Shabot?"

"Shabot will be returning to Paris," LaCroix announced, "within the week, most likely. Until then, he and his family will be staying with a cousin that lives a few miles from here." He looked deliberately at his apprentice. "I have had enough of Shabot."

"The chateau?" Jean Pierre asked.

"Yes."

The young man lowered his head.

"Bri needs to rest," Denis spoke up. "She hasn't slept at all."

"I'm all right."

"Sure she is. She argues a lot when she's tired," the mortal smiled crookedly. "I'll be okay alone for a while. She needs to get out of this room."

"He can't be left alone," the girl countered. "He doesn't sleep well alone."

Indeed? the teacher noted.

"I'll stay with him," Jean Pierre offered.

The older man frowned.

"With Shabot gone," the apprentice went on, "you can sleep in my room, Gabrielle."

"I..." the girl began, "...can I use the lounge in the sitting room?"

"If you want," the apprentice said. "I can't say that I'm anxious to use that bed again, myself. Have you eaten?"

"Yes," came the chorus.

"Well, that's something. Go ahead and get some sleep."

"But I should be taking care of him," Gabrielle protested weakly.

"Just for a few hours. Denis can make do with me for a little while."

"I meant, what about M. LaCroix? He won't like it. Will you, sir?"

The master held his silence.

"It won't be for long," Jean Pierre replied. "Besides, M. LaCroix has often told me that everyone

needs time alone. He'll probably enjoy me being out of his hair for a while." The young man grinned.

"Perhaps," the teacher conceded aloud. Mentally, he sent, *//Clever young men should be wary of being too clever.//*

"It's only for a couple of hours," the apprentice said seriously. "I'll meet you by those caves. Okay?"

"Very well." The master walked out of the servants' room. But he only went as far as the doors to the balcony. There he wrapped himself in his high shields, the ones even his apprentice couldn't penetrate, and returned to the servants' room.

The teacher nearly collided with Gabrielle. Jean Pierre was hustling the girl out.

"Get out there and sleep," the young man ordered. "We'll be fine. If he needs you, I'll call. I promise."

"Yes, sir," the girl yawned as she stumbled to her new bed.

LaCroix followed his apprentice into the sick room.

"As for you," Jean Pierre glowered down at Denis. "Hurry up and rest."

The patient smiled. "Yes, sir."

The young man sat in Gabrielle's chair and settled in to wait.

The teacher was almost ready to leave when he heard Denis speak.

"...May I ask you something?" the servant whispered.

"Sure."

"Will you ever draw me again?"

"I already have. You know that. I did that one of you and Gabrielle in the tub. I thought you saw it."

"I mean now. After all this?"

Jean Pierre frowned in puzzlement. "What does this have to do with anything?"

"I don't know," Denis sighed. "It's not like you don't know what I am or what I've done. ...Some of it, anyway."

"Does that mean you're going to tell me a detailed account of your life?" the apprentice grinned.

"...If...if you want it."

"I don't. If you want to talk about anything, I'm willing to listen. The same way you've listened to me. I know enough. I know you're a good man."

Denis snorted and immediately regretted it, as he turned into his pillow. The apprentice rubbed his back in an effort to help.

"If I had any doubts about that," Jean Pierre went on, "and I don't, but if I did, I have only to look at Gabrielle. She loves you very much."

"No," the servant said quietly.

"Yes," Jean Pierre nodded. "She worries about you. She fusses over you. When she talks, even, you're always there. 'Denis says' this. 'Denis says' that. I could be jealous with very little effort."

"Are you?" the mortal was amazed.

"Maybe a little. That you were there to save her and I was not."

"I brought her into a whorehouse. That's not very good. Is it?"

"You took her in when she was hurt and alone. Whorehouse or not, you gave her a place of safety and warmth—and you. I have no doubt that she would still chose you over the life she had."

Denis shrugged. "She loves you."

"She sleeps with you."

"She sleeps with me," the servant sighed. "She even lets me hold her, if she's afraid, or if it's cold. But there's no sex between us. I think she would with you."

Jean Pierre was silently thoughtful.

"And you care about her," Denis went on. "She knows that. It's not like she's the great love of

your life. That other woman is that. Maybe. And then there's LaCroix. But you're gentle with Gabrielle. You worry about her. You make her smile."

"And you don't, I suppose?"

"It's not the same," the patient shook his head. "None of us is the same because of you."

"Me?"

The servant gulped painfully. The apprentice gave him some water.

"You're supposed to be resting," the young man chided.

"I will. In a minute," Denis sighed. "You're what holds us all together."

"No," Jean Pierre argued. "I'm not that important. It's LaCroix that matters."

"Yes, but he wouldn't want us here if it weren't for you. You wanted Gabrielle, and for some reason you took me, too."

"Well, I didn't want to break up a set. She might not have come without you. Besides, if you remember, I took you first."

"Because M. LaCroix sent me to you. You needed blood," Denis countered.

"You gave me my hearing back. But I wanted you both to come live with me even before that."

Denis closed his eyes. "Do I please you, then?"

"Please me"? What an odd choice of words. Why would you want...?" The apprentice frowned. "I like you. Isn't that enough?"

"It's more than enough," the servant said, reaching out to touch the other's arm. "It's more than I hoped."

"I don't understand."

"M. LaCroix said we belong to you."

"No," Jean Pierre said quickly. "Not yet. ...Not yet."

"But we want to. I want to." Denis seemed to gather his words.

"Yes?" the young man prompted.

"M. LaCroix has done many things for you. It's only right that you be grateful."

"It's not just gratitude."

"No," Denis agreed. "I don't know what's between you. I've seen him watch you and his eyes gleam. But so do mine," he gulped. "...And so do Shabot's."

"You are not Shabot. I wouldn't have even considered taking you, if you had been." Jean Pierre shuddered. He shook his head to clear it. "But what's that got to do with your pleasing me?"

"Everything," the servant said weakly.

"Why don't we finish this conversation some time later?"

"No, please," Denis said, holding tightly to the apprentice's hand.

"Okay. But only five minutes," Jean Pierre said, pulling out an old pocket watch with his free hand.

LaCroix recognized it as the one he had given the young man before his conversion.

"And then," the apprentice went on, "I'm going to put you asleep again."

"That will be fine."

"I'm sorry, Denis. I don't understand."

"I know," the servant sighed. "You love LaCroix. I don't know how, 'cause I don't think it's sex. I know sex and it's not what holds you, like ropes or chains, maybe..."

"Sometime I want you to tell me why you don't think it's sex," Jean Pierre said. "There's a few people I'd like to explain it to."

"Like the lady," Denis said softly.

"Later for that. Right now, you've got four minutes."

The servant nodded and sighed. "You love LaCroix. You love Gabrielle, in a different way, of course. And I can't help but wonder..."

"What?"

"...If...there's...anything left for me."

Jean Pierre frowned.

"I'm a..." Denis tried to explain, "selfish man. Before I met Gabrielle, I only looked after myself. There was no one else to do it. With Gabrielle, she didn't want that much, so nothing really changed." Denis swallowed. "Then you came to Claudette's. Everything changed. At first, I was angry...."

"Because of Gabrielle."

The servant nodded. "Then I was jealous. She wasn't afraid of you. She had been terrified of almost everyone in that house. But not of you. And then when I posed with you, it was... It changed again."

Denis started coughing then, gasping in between and clutching at his throat. The apprentice reached up and covered the servant's hand with his own.

"Easy," Jean Pierre said softly. "Take it easy. You're all right."

The injured man's body slowly relaxed.

LaCroix watched with more than a little interest. Less than a year into the Life and the apprentice was already using mind control. And he was using it with a very unconscious ease. This fledgling was truly remarkable.

"Are you going to sleep now?" Jean Pierre asked Denis. "Under your own power?"

But the patient wasn't ready to rest just yet. He shook his head.

"All right," the young man sighed. "What do you want from me, Denis?"

"Everything," the servant rasped out. "But since..." He gulped, and started over. "That you take me again."

The teacher could see the reluctance in Jean Pierre's face.

"Do you know what you're asking?"

"Yes," Denis breathed. "Blood."

LaCroix almost shared his apprentice's perplexed expression.

"Please," the servant whispered. "It's all I have that you want. My body doesn't excite you. I wish... I'm not strong like LaCroix. I'm not innocent like Gabrielle. I'm only a common whore."

"No," Jean Pierre said with certainty. "Gabrielle wouldn't love a common whore. You also wouldn't be here. LaCroix wouldn't have allowed it. Neither would I. You're not a common anything."

Denis gathered his strength. "You'll take Gabrielle again." The servant noticed the apprentice's face, his embarrassment. "No, she hopes that you do. If she's afraid, it's because she enjoyed it." Denis smiled. "So did I. ...I...I don't want to be left behind."

The apprentice considered. "Be sure," he said. "You're going down a road that you won't be able to go back on soon."

"I'm sure," Denis whispered. "...Now?"

"No," Jean Pierre said with finality. "You've lost enough blood. You need to sleep."

"But then I will sleep," the servant said weakly. "That was almost as good as the other. To sleep without dreams. I have too many dreams. ...But first, I need to... I should..." Denis waved a weak hand over his groin.

"Relieve yourself?" the apprentice offered tentatively.

"Yes," the servant smiled.

"I know it's hard," Jean Pierre agreed. "Street talk comes so easily to mind. But LaCroix doesn't approve of such language."

"You, too?"

"Me, too. Can you sit up? Or just roll over to the edge of the bed?"

"Let me try to sit."

The apprentice handled the chamber pot and his weak patient with a calm sort of efficiency. He

paid the mortal's nudity the same indifference that he gave to his own. He eased the patient back on his pillow.

"No blood," the young man mumbled as he slid the pan back under the bed. "It's a good sign."

"I am better," the servant said.

Jean Pierre nodded. He studied Denis a moment, as if trying to decide how to proceed.

"Hold me?" the mortal asked softly.

Without a word, the apprentice went to the other side of the bed and crawled toward the other man. Gently, he put his arms around the bruised chest. Happily, Denis snuggled in close to his master.

"Yes," he whispered. Then the mortal positioned his throat by Jean Pierre's mouth.

The young immortal hesitated only a moment before biting into the offered vein.

LaCroix nodded with approval.

After a few moment, the apprentice lifted his head. Denis smiled in his near sleep. But his arms tightened when Jean Pierre began to pull away to leave the bed.

"Please?" the servant murmured.

"All right," the young man said, lying back with his mortal friend. He, too, was asleep in short order.

The teacher smiled.

Then he went into the parlor. After making sure that Gabrielle was asleep, he picked up the girl and carried her back into the servants' bedroom. He settled her on Jean Pierre's other side, draping her arm over the apprentice's breast. LaCroix stepped back and viewed the grouping with satisfaction.

LaCroix then turned on his heel and left the suite. He ignored the manager and various personnel in the hotel, as he strode through the lobby. Once outside, the teacher wandered aimlessly.

He had almost a hour and a half to kill while his apprentice stayed out of his hair.

LaCroix found his supper fairly quickly in the person of a brash young woman who had strayed too far from her family. On impulse, he let her live since he wasn't that hungry. He left her sleeping on a stone bench just beyond the lights of another hotel. Certainly, she didn't have the purity of Gabrielle. But it might be helpful to have a willing mortal come to him if he decided not to go out.

The teacher briefly considered checking on Shabot to make sure that he returned to Paris. But then he rejected the idea. Whether Shabot stayed or not was inconsequential. The likelihood that Shabot would even try to escape was highly improbable. The teacher would consider his actions toward the mortal the next time he saw him.

The master cut through a lesser traveled street on his way down to the beach. It was there that he found the bodies.

There were two of them. It took no time at all to recognize them as two of the bandits from a few weeks before. One was the thief with the shattered wrist. His back was broken. Turning over the other, LaCroix saw the face of the leader of the group. The hilt of the old sword was buried with force in the mortal's gullet.

So you met someone more offended by your audacity than impressed with your bravery, the teacher thought.

Still it was strange that the point of the sword had not shown through the thief's back. The master looked around. He caught sight of a blade tip.

Someone had snapped the sword in two and then used the broken haft to kill the thief. An interesting bit of vicious retaliation. Who would...?

Duran.

Slowly, LaCroix got to his feet. An odd method of murder was hardly proof of Duran's existence in this place.

The teacher turned, searching for any nearby immortal. There was nothing.

Of course, why would Duran remain in the vicinity? On the other hand, if LaCroix could shield

himself from another immortal, then so should that Ancient One.

The master rose into the air until he could see the outer edge of the entire town.

Still nothing.

LaCroix concentrated. He picked up his apprentice's spark, in the far-off hotel. He shook his head. That meant nothing. The teacher would always be able to find Jean Pierre.

The master came down on the highest point in the town, which happened to be a church steeple. He cast out again, seeking out Duran's existence.

Suddenly, there he was, hovering not ten feet from the teacher.

"Hail, Russian Bastard."

LaCroix replied calmly, "Duran." He had wondered if time and his own imagination had built up Duran's presence in his memory. He was wrong.

"You would have found me soon, by the way," the large man smiled. "I just decided to save you the strain."

Stay calm and watchful. React later. "Thank you."

"How is Beatrice these days?"

Beatrice. Lorraine's original name. She hated it. *Think about it later.* "Quite well," LaCroix answered.

"And that pretty young man. Your protégé, I believe? How is he faring?"

Stay calm. "The same," the teacher said.

"Jean Pierre, isn't that his name? He seems to be quite...precocious." Duran smiled.

LaCroix took a controlled deep breath. "He would be honored that you think so."

"Would he?" the Ancient One asked, beginning a lazy circle around the master.

Just as slowly, the teacher turned, studying the big man's every move.

"Have you told him about me?" Duran crooned.

"A little. When he told me he had seen you."

"I frightened him. And his companion."

LaCroix managed a small shrug. "Jean Pierre isn't stupid." *Only an idiot wouldn't be afraid of you.*

"I think, perhaps, he is much more than 'not stupid,'" Duran said.

"It's too soon to say as yet."

"I would venture a guess," the Old One began smoothly.

Watch him.

"...That he will become someone quite remarkable and...dangerous."

"Dangerous?" The question was out of his mouth before he could consider it. *Stupid.*

"You haven't noticed?" Duran mocked. "You're his master and you haven't seen that tiny flame that flickers behind his eyes? I'm surprised."

He was surprised? What had Duran seen?

"Very surprised," the big man mused. "I have heard that you are the most powerful of us all." Duran grinned. "At least in recent times."

What was he after? "You flatter me," the teacher said cautiously.

"Do I?"

LaCroix waited. He could feel the pull, the compulsion. But the master stood firm. He didn't try to break Duran's hold. LaCroix wasn't stupid, either. He only strove to divert the spell, to shield his own mind.

The teacher was successful. But he didn't waste time congratulating himself. Who could be sure that this was the extent of Duran's powers.

"Ah-h-h," the Ancient One breathed as he came closer. "I would like to know you better. You and your young...friend." He grinned.

Like a sewer.

"But not now," Duran said. "I have other matters to attend to." The other turned away as he rose higher into the air and disappeared. A voice floated down. "Teach him well, Bastard."

Silence weighed in heavily around the teacher. LaCroix sank to the street below. He began to walk.

It was still early. Jean Pierre shouldn't have left yet for the caves. Before crossing to the street that led to the hotel, the master stopped and listened. There was no sign of Duran.

Quickly, LaCroix entered the hotel and went up to their rooms.

They would have to leave Trouville. Not that Duran couldn't find them, if he so chose. But another talk with Lorraine might be prudent, to find out all he could about this new enemy.

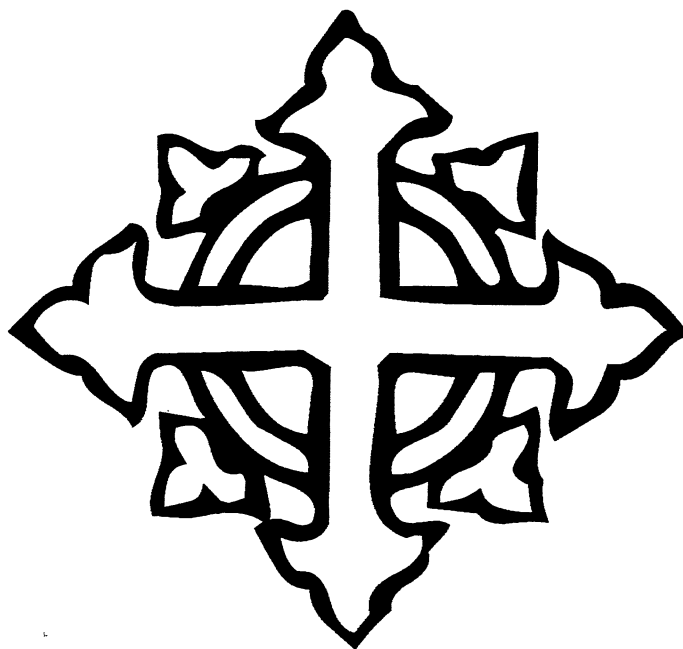
He found Jean Pierre still asleep, still firmly entrenched between his mortal friends. Even as he watched, the teacher saw the young man started to rouse.

Blue eyes found him in the dark. "Misha..." the apprentice began sleepily.

//Stay// LaCroix sent. *//If you're comfortable.//*

The young man nodded and nestled into the bed. Denis pulled himself close to Jean Pierre's back. Gabrielle rested her head at the apprentice's shoulder. The young man, for his part, wrapped his fingers around her throat.

Jean Pierre would take her before daybreak, the teacher was sure. LaCroix sat down to wait. They would talk about returning to Paris tomorrow. For now, he would keep watch.





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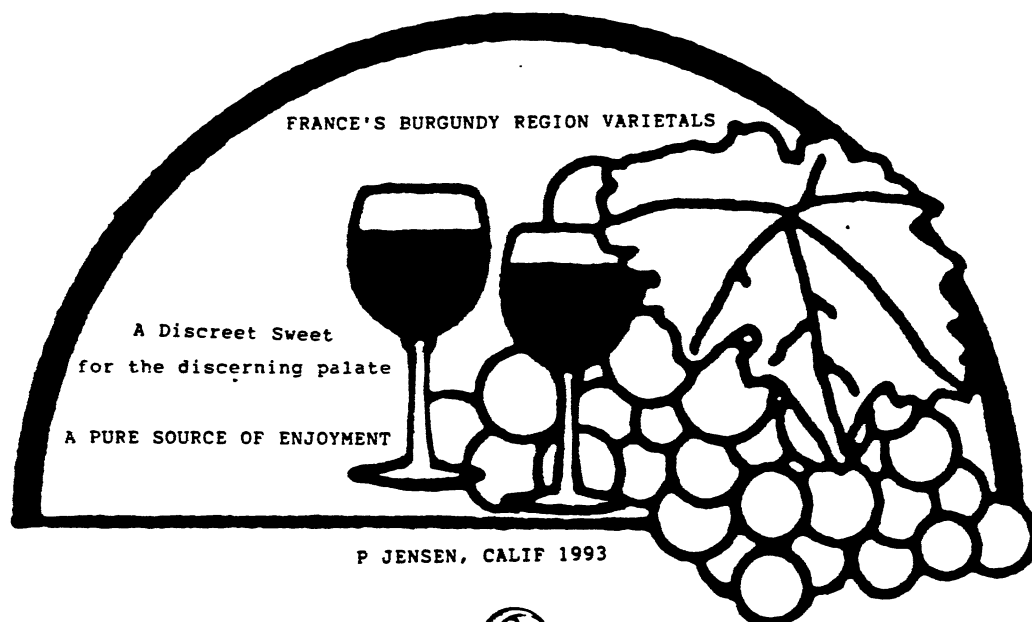
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The Sitting

By: B. N. Fish

(Story #7 in *The LaCroix Chronicles*)

"Are you ready to be ravished?"

LaCroix put down his valise inside the front door of his home. Calmly, he looked at his young companion. "I beg your pardon?" he said with mock seriousness.

"You said when we got home that you'd let me ravish you. And you said that you would co-operate," Jean Pierre announced.

"So I did." The teacher considered. "Ignoring the fact that ravishment indicates a certain amount of spontaneity, may I ask where is this ravishment to take place?"

"Well, I suppose we could do it here on the floor...but I don't think it would be very comfortable."

"No," the older man agreed solemnly. He was beginning to more than just wonder if his apprentice truly understood what he was saying.

"How about a bed, then?" Jean Pierre offered brightly.

"Whose?"

"Yours," the young man replied immediately. "It's closer."

"So it is," LaCroix agreed.

The two men made their way down to the basement. The teacher watched impassively as Jean Pierre stripped out of his clothes. The older man only took off his hat and cloak. The apprentice pointed to the bed. LaCroix folded his arms across his chest and studied his apprentice. Was the young man really serious?

"Come on, off with your boots," Jean Pierre said. "You said that you'd co-operate."

Silently, the teacher sat on the bed and shucked his footwear.

Gently, the young man pushed him back on the bed. Then the apprentice climbed up and over the master's body until he was astride the older man's hips.

Jean Pierre grinned as he put his hands on the teacher's chest. LaCroix's hands found themselves resting on bare thighs.

"Will you really pose for me tomorrow?" the apprentice asked.

"Ah, yes. The ravishment was supposed to accompany a sitting, wasn't it?"

"You don't have to," the young man said seriously.

"Perhaps not," the teacher agreed. "But I did say that I would do so. Is that why you made sure that Denis and Gabrielle stayed at the patio house?" The apprentice had been almost adamant that his two

servants remain at his own home, while he and LaCroix went on to the master's residence.

"Yeah," Jean Pierre admitted.

"Is this 'guarding my modesty,' as you put it?" the teacher asked.

"Uh-huh. Will you? Pose in the nude for me tomorrow?"

"As much as I am inclined to say otherwise, I have agreed."

"Is it so hard for you?"

LaCroix shrugged. "It is only a matter of the mind, my mind. My personal nudity has always been...personal. I trust you, Jean Pierre."

"I hope you never regret that trust."

"So do I," the teacher agreed quietly. "Now, are you ready to sleep? It has been a long night."

The young man nodded. "It has, at that." The apprentice began touching the older man's chest.

"It was a nice holiday. Pretty much. I did enjoy the ocean. It's so..."

"Overwhelming?"

"Yeah, and big, and everything. Can we go again sometime?"

"Very possibly," LaCroix agreed. "But without the entourage."

The young man nodded. "I know. I made a real mess of that, insisting on Shabot coming, and then nearly killing him."

"The incident is over. Hopefully, you both will learn from it."

"Yeah," Jean Pierre frowned.

"And what have you learned?"

The apprentice continued his light exploration of the master's clavicle through the older man's shirt. "That I have to control my temper," he said.

"And why is that?" the teacher questioned as he worked at keeping his own hands very still.

"It's too dangerous not to."

"For Shabot, you mean."

"No. Well, yes, him, too. But mostly for myself. I don't want to kill. I know that I have killed. But... I don't know. I think what scares me is that I'm not really sorry for what I did. I know I'd do it again," Jean Pierre said sadly.

The young man was now leaning forward, gently touching LaCroix's face.

"Why should you be sorry?" the teacher asked.

"Because I almost killed him," the apprentice repeated with exasperation.

"Have you forgotten why you attacked him, by some chance?"

"No," the young man sighed.

"Sabot was damaging your property."

"Denis is not my 'property.'"

"He is," LaCroix said with finality. "When you took his blood, you made him yours. It is the same with Gabrielle. Whether or not you like the terms, the meaning is quite clear. Denis and Gabrielle are your slaves by blood."

"I don't want any slaves. I've been treated like that myself enough to know I don't want it for anyone else."

"Then you should have never drunk of them," the teacher said simply.

Jean Pierre glared at him. "Denis was your idea."

"I don't recall your arguing the point at the time," the teacher said easily.

"No," the young man admitted. "I almost killed him then."

"You did not."

"But I nearly—"

"The terms 'nearly' and 'almost' have no relevance here. Denis is very much alive and apparently content with his life—and Gabrielle's."

"I hope so. I like them both. I liked..." The apprentice sighed. "That last night in Trouville... I liked sleeping with them both."

"So did they, apparently."

"Gabrielle was as embarrassed as me, I think, when we all woke up together. We just slept, but it felt so good. It was almost like being with you, only different."

Jean Pierre stretched up over the master's head, arching his back. The teacher's hands found themselves holding the slim waist.

"Have I been replaced?" LaCroix mocked. "Perhaps you should return to your house and sleep with them."

"No," the young man replied quickly. "There's no one like you. No one at all." As the apprentice eased back once more, he stared into the older man's impassive eyes. "Can I stay with you?" he asked cautiously. "Here? Right here?"

"And if I say 'no'?"

"Then I'll leave," the young man said sadly.

"Will you?"

"Yes, sir," Jean Pierre said quietly as he began to remove himself.

LaCroix tightened his hold on the young body. "Since there are no 'sirs' in this room," he said finally, "you might as well stay. It's late."

The young man moved to settle in at his master's side, draping an arm and leg over the teacher's still form. LaCroix curled his own arm around bare shoulders.

"And tomorrow?" the apprentice asked.

"Tomorrow, we work." The older man smiled. "Our usual positions reversed." They slept.

* * *

Come evening, the teacher was almost amused as the young man scrambled for his clothes.

"You're sure?" the apprentice asked, giving him one more opportunity to get out of it.

"Go ahead. I will join you when I'm ready."

Jean Pierre literally ran for the stairs and the top floor studio.

* * *

From behind the dressing room curtain, LaCroix watched Jean Pierre standing at the easel. The apprentice kept checking his supplies as he made sure he had everything. He knew LaCroix would be out there soon. The young man was nervous.

This would be the first time that his teacher had ever posed for him. All the drawings the apprentice had done of the older man in the past had been from memory, or at most, when LaCroix was talking to him. This would be a real sitting.

Jean Pierre seemed to already have a basic idea for his composition. His teacher had seen the blocking on the canvas. The master would be the centerpiece with three or four lesser figures around him.

"Jean Pierre?"

The young man looked up. LaCroix stood at the far end of the room, tossing aside his robe. He

waited for instructions. But all the apprentice did was stare. It was the first time he had seen his teacher entirely nude. It was almost as if the young man's body had forgotten how to breathe.

"Reporting for ravishment, sir," the older man said with mock seriousness.

"But..."

"What?" the teacher said calmly, reining in his own unease.

"H-How can you say I'm beautiful?" the apprentice stuttered.

"Am I?" the teacher said with a smile.

The young man shook his head, trying to clear it, but LaCroix knew he could still feel the teacher's presence.

"Where do you want me?" LaCroix asked briskly.

The apprentice pointed to a wide chair. The older man sat.

"One foot forward. One foot back," the young man told him.

The model complied.

"Knees wide. Arms out. Lean back. Chin up." The young artist circled, eyeing his model.

LaCroix waited.

"You'll have to move that," the apprentice said.

"What?"

The young man pointed at the male member resting on his teacher's leg.

"It's called a penis, Jean Pierre."

"I'm aware of the vocabulary. Now, move it between your legs, please."

"You're the artist. Position me."

Exasperated, the young man knelt by his teacher. "Please, sir."

Deliberately, LaCroix took the apprentice's hand in his own and used it to push the organ into its desired place. The young man closed his eyes and then crouched down on his ankles.

"Do I frighten you, Jean Pierre?"

"Often," the apprentice sighed, bowing his head.

The teacher put his fingers in the tousled hair. "Why is that?"

The young man laid his forehead on his teacher's bare knee. "I suppose when I know that, I'll know what to do about it."

The older man's hand continued caressing his student's scalp. "You should fight me," said

LaCroix. "I dominate you and you allow it."

"I don't want to fight you."

"And that frightens us both, I think."

The hand traveled down the apprentice's neck to the front of his throat. Brown eyes looked into blue. The teacher leaned back. The young man blinked and got to his feet.

Jean Pierre got to work. He started putting more details in his preliminary sketch. "I talked to Gabrielle yesterday," he said, "about becoming immortal."

"Jean Pierre, I told you she was not to become immortal. That is not why I allowed her to come into this house. She and Denis are servants, more than servants, slaves, bound to you by blood. That is their purpose, their only purpose. They will serve you all their lives."

"She doesn't want immortality."

The teacher was only mildly surprised.

"Do you want to know why?" Jean Pierre asked as he switched to brush and paint.

"If you wish to tell me."

"She doesn't want to live forever."

LaCroix waited for the rest of it.

"She really believes in her own immortal soul. She wants to go to home to God."

The older man said easily, "Faith in heaven can be a powerful force. And it's not something that's

granted to all of us."

The apprentice nodded. "She wants to see again. I could argue almost anything, but not that."

"Good," LaCroix said quietly. "What about Denis?"

"Denis? Oh, I haven't talked to him yet."

"Don't."

"I have to," the apprentice countered.

"You do not. He serves his purpose best as he is. He is where he belongs, where I wish him to be."

"But I can't just..."

"Jean Pierre, I will not bend on this."

The young man lowered his head. Then he went back to his painting in silence.

The hours passed.

The apprentice allowed his model several breaks to stretch and move about. LaCroix stood and bent, keeping well away from the unfinished work. His own feeling of vulnerability was well in hand. That was possibly because he knew that the young man was aware of his every move.

Finally--

"You can get up now," Jean Pierre said. The artist concentrated on his painting. His model moved behind him.

The young man stepped back to squint at his canvas. He almost stepped into his teacher. He looked to see LaCroix with his robe on. But the older man hadn't bothered to close or tie the garment. The young man stiffly turned back to the painting.

A regally nude LaCroix was surrounded by nearly nude supplicants.

"It needs another figure," the apprentice said.

"I agree. There," the older man indicated a space at his image's shoulder.

Jean Pierre nodded. "Shabot, maybe."

"No, not Shabot. Not at my back. You."

"Me?"

The teacher nodded. "With a loin cloth and a spear, perhaps. You could turn that one into Shabot." He pointed to the back of a crouching, broad-hipped woman.

"That would take some major re-apportioning, but yes. The pose would suit him."

"More than that would suit him. But leave it for another time."

"What?"

"I was thinking of specialized castration, only the testicles," LaCroix said with a showing of teeth.

Jean Pierre frowned. "You have a vicious streak."

"Are you only now noticing?" the older man asked innocently.

"I'm only now noticing," Jean Pierre countered, "how you constantly surprise me."

"Another suggestion?" the teacher offered.

"What?"

"Give me a loin cloth as well."

"Why?"

"Because any show of male genitalia makes it pornography."

"Then, no. This is for me, not for anyone else. Besides, it seems to me that loin cloths and fig leaves just accent the area, not hide anything."

"An interesting observation. And even though true, some of the People have every bit as much of tender sensibilities as any mortal."

"The People? What have they got to do with anything?"

"Possibly quite a bit. I think this would make a fine addition to the Gallery."

"The Gallery? Me?"

"Why not? You're as good as anyone else there. Better than some. This isn't as suggestive as Madriane's, for all the show of skin."

"But I didn't mean it for anyone else."

"So, what would you change for other eyes?"

The apprenticed turned back to the painting. "Nothing. I don't want to put clothes on them, least of all you."

"But why?"

"You don't need them."

"Jean Pierre, it isn't important. I'm impotent. I have no one to impress."

The young man shook his head.

"What is it?" LaCroix asked.

"You being impotent."

"Do you doubt it?"

"I know it's not true."

"Must I prove it to you?" the older man asked softly.

The apprentice turned away. "You're about as sexually charged as anyone I've ever met, or even heard of. You come into a room and everyone knows it. Ask Jeanette...or Shabot."

"And you?"

"You know what you make me feel."

"What is that?" LaCroix whispered.

"There are times when I...I want...you to... You know I wouldn't fight you."

The teacher turned the young man to face him. He touched a lean cheek. "But then you would always doubt," said the older man.

"No. Sometimes I wish we were lovers just so I'd know what I feel about you. I hear the others say I should have left you long ago, that I should be on my own, that I don't need you. I want to need you. I like being with you. I'm as bad as Shabot, who almost withers away if you stay away too long."

"You are not Shabot," LaCroix countered. "If you wish to stay with me, it's because you choose to. Shabot has no such choice."

"What will happen to him?"

"He will die," the teacher shrugged.

"Because you'll kill him? ...Or I will?" he added softly.

"Perhaps. But suicide is also within the realm of possibility."

"Because you'll leave him?"

"It has been known to happen."

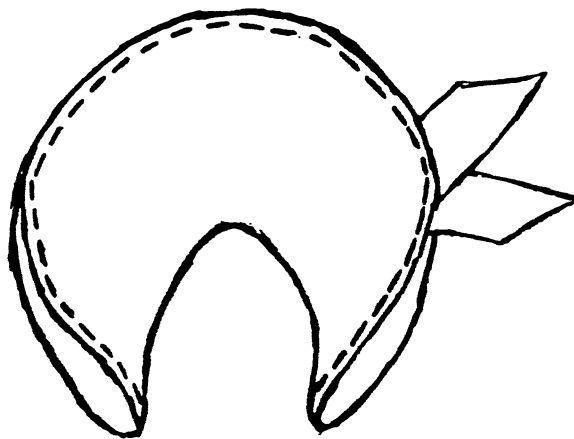
"I can understand that," the young man shuddered. "Promise that you'll kill me rather than desert me?"

"I'll make no such promise," LaCroix shook his head. He settled his hand around the young man's throat. "You are of the People. You don't 'need' me, no matter what the emotional ties between us. Perhaps you'll be the one to leave me?"

"...I doubt...that will make it any easier."

The older man smiled. "Good." He held his apprentice a long time. *Ravishment, indeed.*





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AND COURTESY.

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TO TRY A NEW PATH IN LIFE.

BE AN AMBASSADOR ON AN
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MISSION---ONE NIGHT GERMAN,
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MANY ARE THE WAYS OF LOVE.
SURPRISING ARE THEIR ENDS.

YOU HAVE AN ARTISTIC FLAIR---
LET YOUR COLORS FLOW.

BELIEVE IN MAGIC---
CAST A DEADLY SPELL.

FORTUNE COOKIES

FOR VAMPIRES

FANGS FOR THE MEMORIES

BY: CINDY RANCOURT

Water dripped down the rough hewn walls, joining the shallow stream that ran just below boot level. No sunlight penetrated this far beneath the earth; from tunnel to tunnel there existed only the inky curtains of eternal night. Dark it was, but not silent. The world was alive with sound, from soft squeaks to furtive scurrying as the inhabitants of the underground bustled about in their daily hunt for food. It may be imagined that it caused no little stir when five invaded this enclosed realm, shattering the gloom with light.

"Sewer. Again. Sewer. I *hate* it down here!"

Though the words were grumbled softly, they elicited groans from all around. The single-file procession stopped in its tracks and turned in the direction of the speaker, illuminating him from two directions. A miner's hardhat bobbed over one wide blond curl as the leader placed both hands on his hips. "You've been saying that for almost an hour, Peter. Redundancy will not shorten our assignment by a single millisecond."

Peter Venkman, the grumbler, also came to a halt. He shoved a rifle-shaped particle thrower under one elbow, then tipped his own hardhat up off his forehead. This, unfortunately, served the dual task of revealing the low ceiling and disturbing the solid sheath of cockroaches that clung to the slimy stone. Peter shuddered and hurriedly looked away. "I don't care. I didn't want to take this lousy job, anyway." He broke off, nostrils flaring. "I was wrong—this place smells even *worse* than a catbox."

"*Yucky. Yucky.*" A faintly glowing green blob also wearing a hardhat-plus-light floated nearer, nervously checking over its right shoulder before slinging a skinny arm around Peter's neck. "*Place yucky. Scary. Slimer not like it here.*"

Peter dislodged the arm and wiped away a spot of green slime left behind. "Couldn't agree more, Spud. Not that I want to offend Dr. Spengler by griping."

Egon's blue eyes glittered with annoyance. "Like it or not, Peter, we're here and we've got a job to do." He brandished a jewelry box-sized object that was quietly beeping to itself; its fascia glowed red in the gloom. "According to the PKE meter, we're in an area of high psychokinetic energy. All indications so far read as a Class 7 or better, but with the walls blocking my equipment, I'm unable to tell precisely what spectral subdivision we're dealing with."

"That lady from the Sewer Authority seemed to know what type," a rich baritone voice interrupted from Venkman's right. The speaker was almost a shadow himself, dark skin making

his face nearly invisible behind the glare of the lamps. Winston Zeddemore imitated Slimer's action of peering over his shoulder, examining walls, ceiling and ground with equal precision, his own weapon gripped securely in both hands. "According to her, what we're tracking down here is a...vampire."

"I don't like vampires," Venkman complained, swiping sweaty dark hair out of his eyes. "Nasty things. Can't trust them. Remember '86? Lupusville? Our throwers barely knocked them down and we couldn't trap them at all."

"Count Vostok wasn't so bad," Zeddemore remarked fairly. "He seemed to be a pretty decent guy once we got to know him."

Spengler racked his thrower, using his now free hand to adjust two dials on the meter. "Though I was unable to perform the experiments on Count Vostok that I would have liked, the readings I took from both him and the inhabitants of Lupusville, vampire *and* werewolf, seemed to indicate that none of them were true vampires—at least not in the sense that Count Glutenborgen was. The others actually registered closer to the traditional Class 6 metamorphs we've faced in the past, possibly one a subspecies to the next. My theory is that Vostok and the others were simple shape-shifters who had somehow become locked into one or two options."

"*Count Glutenborgen scarrrry!*" Slimer announced, perching on Venkman's shoulder like a giant pigeon. "*Didn't like him.*"

"He sure liked you, Spud. Too much." Winston scratched under his helmet, removing a beetle that had crawled up his collar and lodged in his short, curly hair. He grimaced and flicked it away. "Vostok did say he was the last of his *kind* even though there were a whole slew of vampires in Lupusville. Maybe he was talking about the last of his subspecies?"

Egon stroked his square jaw, eyes distracted behind his lenses. "If I could only have hooked him up to the plasmic electrometer for a few minutes...."

"You may get another chance," Peter grumbled, wiping his face on his sleeve. The humidity was high with so much water around, though this far underground the temperature was cool. "If that lady was right, we may be facing a whole new set. Hope this doesn't mean some of those guys from Lupusville got loose. They were tough."

"What Mrs. Orsini said," the blond put in before Peter could launch an entirely new line of complaint, "is that two of her workers were attacked down here and bitten. We've met many nether-entities with teeth and claws who most assuredly did not qualify under nomenclature including the term vampire."

"That one guy got chomped right in the neck," Peter shot back, again swatting Slimer away. "That doesn't make you just a liiiiiittle bit suspicious?"

A fourth figure had been standing several yards farther down the tunnel, waiting impatiently for the conversation to end. But now he stepped into the illuminated circle of the others and slapped Venkman on the arm. Ray Stantz was slightly shorter than the other three, with a smudged, youthful face made distinctive by large brown eyes and an infectious smile. "Come on, guys! This place is neat! It's history! Do you know how old some of these tunnels are?" He turned and patted the nearest wall, then jumped back with a cry of disgust when a six-inch waterbug strolled casually across his thumb. His smile, however, returned immediately. "This section alone could be a hundred years old! Thousands, if we've accessed some of the natural caverns criss-crossing Manhattan! A lot of people even go spelunking down here!"

Visibly unimpressed, Venkman folded his arms across his chest, keeping his own distance

from the pest-infested walls. "Oh, joy. Does that mean this is high-class sewage?"

"*Yuck,*" Slimer repeated, as thrilled as Venkman. Something outside the ring of lights caught his eye and he floated off, returning seconds later holding a squawling, wiggling brown shape in both hands. Happily, he floated from one man to the next, thrusting it into each man's face, cooing, "*Ohhhh, look! Mousey! Preeeeety mousey.*"

Cries of "Rat!" "Yeow!" and, "I *HATE* rats!" echoed through the narrow chamber during the general outrush. Peter retreated several yards and stopped, an expression of utmost disgust on his handsome face. "Slimer," he began in a calm voice, "Mousey doesn't like being held. Why don't you put Mousey down and let him go play with his mousey friends. Not there!" he added when Slimer made to comply next to his left foot. "Mousey's friends are down the tunnel...waaaaaay down the tunnel."

"*Okay!*" Crooning pleasantly to his charge, the green ghost floated into the unlit portion of the tunnel and vanished.

"Nasty things," Winston shuddered, wiping his palms on his jumpsuit. "Never could stand rats."

"Most unsanitary." Egon adjusted his glasses and peered around, his white 'halo' describing a half-circle. "We'll probably all need booster shots to avoid infection." He again consulted his PKE meter, turning it in all directions. "Still nothing. We shall have to continue our random patrol."

"Watch out for bats!" Ray teased, a mischievous grin lighting his dirty face.

"I'm more worried about rabid cockroaches," Peter volleyed, giving the engineer a friendly shove. "You don't really think there are vampires down here, do you?"

Ray's chorus of, "But wouldn't that be *neat*?!" was interrupted when Winston gave him a silencing poke. Assaulted from two directions, the engineer protected his middle with crossed arms and stepped back out of range.

"I've got a question," the black Ghostbuster went on in a serious vein. "We're pretty confined down here; that means any attacks are going to be fought in close quarters. There's a chance we're gonna get tapped."

"You mean bitten?" Peter questioned, sobering.

Zeddemore nodded. "Remember what happened in Lupusville? Werewolves turning into vampires, and vampires into werewolves, and all because they were bitten." He fingered his collar nervously, then pulled the zipper up as high as it would go. "Frankly, brothers, I don't want to spend the rest of my days enjoying the nightlife." Both he and Peter fixed Egon with an inquiring look.

The physicist cleared his throat. "I would estimate the probability of that happening to be minuscule," he began in tones that declared himself none too sure on the subject. "The plasmic energy in such situations is believed to propagate unchecked upon the death of the host, imbuing some semblance of life to the body and maneuvering it through previously set patterns. Thus, the legends of bodies temporarily animated upon death."

"He means it's a lot like a disease," Ray translated, instinctively rejoining the circle. "Even if you're bitten, you can fight off the effects because...well, you're still alive. But if you die thanks to the bite, your body is forced to mimic the patterns in the injected plasmic energy."

Peter jerked his thumb in the younger man's direction, addressing Winston. "Wasn't he supposed to make like baby words so we could understand this?"

Zeddemore nodded solemnly. "I think the boy's been hanging around Egon too long." He tapped his own temple. "Addles the brain."

"There is, of course, very little recent information on the phenomenon," Egon went on, ignoring both the interruption and Ray's protest. "The closest we've come to modern day effects is what happened in Lupusville."

Boyish enthusiasm lit Ray's face. He cocked his head, exchanging an interested look with Spengler. "Wow! If we go back, we can take some readings off the transformed werewolves and vampires! Maybe one of them would even let us run some tests!"

Spengler was no less excited by the possibility. "Perhaps a return trip to Lupusville...."

Alarmed, Peter nipped that conversation in the bud. He kicked impatiently at the dirty water with one boot, liberally dousing both Spengler and Stantz. "Let's get going, bunkies. I don't want to spend the rest of my life down here."

"You got something better to do?" Winston taunted, following Egon into unexplored reaches.

"They're paying us double for this job," Ray added by way of encouragement.

Peter, bringing up the rear, danced backward, shaking his head pityingly when Stantz tripped over a submerged bit of flotsam. "I don't care if they are paying us quadruple," he grouched, helping the younger man up with a hand under his elbow, "I do *not* want to miss my date with Sandra tonight."

"I'm pleased to see you've set your priorities to so professional an apex," Egon said dryly, absently brushing a corpse white centipede off his pantsleg. He moved a little ahead of the others, sloshing through the ankle-deep waters of the old sewer tunnel with every evidence of distaste. "I had expected more, considering the fact that we *need* that \$10,000 the mayor is willing to pay us for eliminating this particular N-E."

"Who's Sandra?" Ray asked, brushing himself down. "I thought you were seeing that operator lady...." He turned back to lay a sympathetic—if dripping—hand on Peter's shoulder. "It didn't work out? Gosh, Pete, I'm sorry. I hope it wasn't because of my boat or anything."

"*Keeshar*," Slimer quoted unexpectedly, clinging to Ray's neck. "*Him bad dude.*"

Peter rolled his eyes drolly in the younger man's direction. "Ray, Sandra *is* Operator 23. The woman has a name, you know."

Ray shrugged and dropped his hand, resuming his place in line. "I didn't know you'd actually hooked up with her."

That won a moment's silence. "Welllll, we haven't actually 'connected' yet, if that's what you mean. She wasn't able to get time off her job until tonight." He beamed invisibly to the others. "Tonight's the night! I finally get to meet Sandra face-to-face! She's already told me all about herself. Did you know Sandra used to be Miss Wienie Tot?..."

*

*

*

"...all because she guessed how many snouts go into a Wienie Tot!" Peter finished dreamily, pausing at a juncture of three tunnels. "That shows she's as smart as she is.... Which way, Egon?" He waited, tapping his foot impatiently, then glanced over his shoulder when there was

no immediate reply. It wasn't until then he realized he was quite alone. He turned in a circle, shining his lantern in all directions. "Egon? Ray? Winston?" Still nothing. "Slimer?" Peter scratched his head, thinking furiously. "Let's see, we were together when Ray fell into that sink hole...then Winston got that leech in his shorts..." He scratched his head again, dislodging a multi-legged wriggler. Shuddering, he brushed it off his shoulder and took a step to the right, more interested in his current whereabouts than the insect. "Darn. That'll teach me to daydream on company time. I wonder when I lost them."

He cocked his head, listening intently. This far under the streets, there was very little to be heard by way of civilization. A low rumble heralded the passage of a train to his left, then it too was gone. Furtive movements from the floor and walls notified him that he was not *completely* alone much though he would have preferred it to the company of insects and rodents. Listen as he might, however, he could make out no sound from his friends. With a curse, Peter moved to the exact center of the tunnel intersection and flashed his miner's lantern down each branch. Miles of waste-filled pipeline stretched to each compass point, dark, aromatic and depressing.

"Which way did I come from?" he asked himself, more than a bit turned around. "These things all look alike." Something squished unpleasantly under Peter's left boot; with a grimace he pulled it free and shook it off. "I hate sewers," he griped through gritted teeth. "I hate cockroaches and *I HATE THIS JOB!*" This last was given considerable volume; unfortunately, there was no one in the immediate vicinity to hear. All thoughts of Sandra fading rapidly into obscurity, Peter pulled out his pocket transceiver and thumbed it on. "Ray? This is Peter." Instead of Stantz' cheerful tones, the radio produced only rough static. Peter whacked it with his palm and tried again. "Ray, answer me." Still nothing. Peter sighed and rehooked the instrument to his belt. "The walls must be muffling the transmission," he told himself unnecessarily, feeling something damp on his pantsleg. He glanced down to where the rising water was beginning to soak the tops of his boots. "I must have dropped a level without noticing. Better start looking for a way out."

He examined the three tunnels one by one, paying particular attention to a muffled squeaking from the northern-most one. "I should have never let Egon lead off; I *knew* he was out to get me after I told Janine about his date with Wynona." He clenched his fists, scowling ferociously at a braver-than-normal rat that was staring at him from a tiny crack in the ceiling; the rat took the hint and vanished. "If this is Egon's idea of a joke," he finished, choosing a direction more or less at random and starting off, "I'll have his butt for a blue plate special...and I might, anyway. This is all *his* fault."

Cheered by the prospect of revenge for his woes, Peter tromped on, the blackness unrelenting except for the light from his helmet. "First ladder I see, I'm out'a of here," he promised himself, wandering curiously towards an unrecognizable mass covering one wall. The mass squirmed wetly in response to his approach and Peter made a hasty detour along the tunnel's far side. "Ulp! Sooner the better, too. Hope I don't run into that..." He trailed off, a new thought erasing his scowl and replacing it with a nervous frown. "...vampire?"

Reminded, he turned again, shining his light back the way he'd come. "If I run into that thing while I'm by myself..." He didn't finish the thought aloud, but his mind perversely filled in the blanks in graphic detail. Facing a Class 7 was bad enough with the team; without them, it was sure suicide. One proton pack would not easily hold even a Class 5; it would do little more than annoy a Class 7.

Something rustled softly behind him and Peter gulped. "Maybe I'd better hurry," he breathed, starting off again at an increased pace. "I don't...uh...want to be late for my date with Sandra tonight."

He splashed on for some minutes, the water increasing steadily until it was past his knees. It was then that he began to hear another sound, a low groaning wheeze, this time coming from straight ahead. "Oh, boy. Game time."

Peter unclipped his particle thrower with a steady hand, flicking one switch with his thumb and bringing the power levels up to full. The accelerator on his back whined reassuringly in the dank stillness of the sewer. Peter glanced down once to the glowing indicator on the thrower attachment, then strode forward to meet his foe. "Easy way or hard," he called firmly. "It's up to Doctor Venkman to save the day."

Without warning, a dark shape detached itself from the surrounding shadows, uttering loud yells, talon-like fingers reaching clumsily for Peter's throat. The Ghostbuster braced himself and fired, a feral grin twisting his lips. "Hard way!"

A stream of energized particles snaked from Peter's weapon, catching the advancing figure a grazing blow. It flew backwards under the impact of 200,000 gigahertz of pure nucleonic power. Peter crouched to realign his shot, then immediately switched off before the full stream could strike. Illuminated by the harsh radiance, the figure had resolved into the recognizable shape of an old man clothed in rags, light glaring off a perfectly hairless pate.

"Oh, my..." Peter breathed, dropping his thrower and starting for the man. He caught the wizened figure just as it slid down the wall, easing it to the side of the tunnel where the filthy waters ran shallowest.

Limbs flapped weakly, the man's nervous system shorted out by the hyper-ionization. He gasped for air, staring at Peter through eyes which blazed with emotion. "Thank...you," he managed, the frail body jerking convulsively. "Release...at last."

"I'm-I'm sorry!" Peter supported the wrinkled head in his palm, green eyes wide with shock, mind swirling with horror. "Hang on, Pop, I'll get help...."

"No!" The old man grabbed Peter's arm with surprising force. "Let...me die. I'm free...." Further effort on Peter's part would have been useless in any respect; the jaw dropped and the rheumy eyes became fixed. Seconds later, even the spasmodic twitching ceased.

Peter shook the body once. "Don't die," he begged, his voice hoarse. "Please, don't die."

"Don't worry about the old one," came from the dead man's gaping mouth. "Worry about yourself."

Peter released the body and drew back, rising to his feet and retrieving his thrower all in one smooth motion. Tears trickled down his face, but Peter, long adept at the skills of self-preservation, reacted without hesitation to that mocking voice. "Who are you?" he demanded, backing away several yards. The hairs on his neck stirred, the feeling of the macabre overwhelming even by Peter's seasoned standards. "*What* are you?"

A pale nimbus of blue light emerged from the old man's chest, separating into three distinct orbs. They rose slowly, pulsing to some irregular beat. "*We are the Q'utah.*"

The words were unspoken, yet clear in Peter's thoughts. Unfazed thanks to long experience, Peter sneered. "*We* are the Ghostbusters," he snapped. "And *you* are history." He snapped off a bolt of energized protons while throwing himself to the side of the tunnel until his back was protected by the grimy walls. His first shot went wild, smacking into the ceiling and splattering

into a million shards of light. The orbs bobbed closer, dodging Peter's second shot with deceptive ease. The brown-haired psychologist ducked instinctively as they dove for him, angling for a clear shot. His ankle twisted on him and he went down, but was up almost immediately, spitting his mouth clear of the foul water and scrambling to gain his feet before his foes reached him.

He didn't make it.

"*We are the Q'utah*, the orbs repeated, reuniting into a single mass. "*And we are now you!*" With that triumphant, if silent, cry, the extra-dimensional intelligence descended on the downed Peter Venkman; he raised his arms in defense but to no avail—unimpeded by either flesh or brown uniform, the Q'utah sped to and *into* Peter's chest...and vanished.

Sensations flooded him, a cacophony of thoughts and emotions twisted, alien—malevolent. Personalities rose in trio, unbelievably ancient, skittering like spiders through his brain. Peter's own personality recoiled as evil swelled in his breast, and hatred, and enjoyment of others' pain. Most of all, however, overriding all other feelings and thoughts was an all-consuming terror which filled Peter Venkman to the very core of his being, fanning the spark of encroaching madness to a full flame.

Peter whimpered, fists batting at his own chest and head, but there was no retreat from the inhabitants of his mind. "We are the Q'utah," they said using Peter's mouth, "and we wish to feed."

Peter shook his head wildly, wresting back command of his own faculties only with a surge of effort. "N-no," he gasped. "I-I am Peter... Venk— Venkman.... I am...."

"*You are ours*," the Q'utah replied scornfully, this time as thoughts rather than words. "*As Robeck was ours*."

"You...yours to do...what?" Peter managed, lips resisting the words. His arms and legs twitched as the Q'utah fought him for the single body; Peter fought back, exerting that iron will that had ever been a part of him.

"*Listen to us, human*," they ordered, turning their efforts to generating a flood of the purest agony Peter had ever experienced. "*Obey!*"

"No," he moaned, clutching his head. "No.... Get out!" Panicked, he threw himself against the tunnel wall, beating his head against the living rock once and then falling to his knees. "*Get out!*" He wrapped trembling arms around his chest and began to rock, whimpering pitifully under his breath, and repeating over and over, "Get out, get out...."

How long this went on Peter was never to know—for him, it could have been an eternity. Finally, the pain abated and Peter raised his head. "We are the Q'utah," he said, horrifiedly feeling his own lips form the words. "and we wish to feed. ...No!" He shook his head wildly, recapturing control of his vocal centers only with a visible effort. "N-no," he gasped. "I-I am *not* Q'utah. I...am...Peter."

"You are ours," his own lips replied scornfully. "As Robeck was ours, so shall you be until the end of your mortal time."

"Why?" Peter managed. Emotions chased themselves across his features, anger and delight, confidence and despair as each mind tested its individual 'muscle' against Peter's firm grip. At long last, however, it was Peter Venkman who peered out of the green eyes, the psychologist having come off victorious...for the moment. With a grunt, he forced his legs to stiffen and staggered forward a few steps. The Q'utah abruptly ceased their own efforts, and Peter slipped and fell in the sudden release. "I...."

He broke off, doubling over at a new wrenching pain, the feeling that every muscle and nerve was being twisted out of shape. He opened his mouth to scream, a searing agony in his face nearly making him black out. To his astonishment, two small objects fell out of his mouth, an instinctive grab nabbing one of them before it could be lost in the sluggishly running water. "I lost a cap?" he managed, claspings his face against another wave of pain. He probed his gumline with his tongue; to his horror, two new, pointed teeth had emerged and were slowly growing. "Oh, my—!" There were other things happening to his body as well, without outward manifestation but discernible from the pain which continued to wrack his gut. Muscles ached, his heart beat faster, respiration increasing under a heightened need for oxygen. "No!" Like a wild animal, he started to run, streaking wildly toward somewhere—anywhere!—seeking freedom from the ravages of his own mind.

Much later, exhausted and panting, he slowed his headlong rush and leaned against a slime-covered wall, trembling like a leaf. "*Listen to us, human,*" the voices ordered, speaking for the first time since Peter had begun to run. Peter froze. "*You are strong. You will serve us well. How do you feel?*"

Peter shuddered, a new sensation assailing his senses, as painful in its way as were the others. He licked his lips. "I feel...hungry."

* * *

The long concrete ribbon stretched eternally as mile after mile unfolded under Peter's feet. He walked aimlessly through the city, through brownstone and slum, eyes cast downward. The streets were far from deserted despite the late hour—the City That Never Sleeps had earned its reputation honestly, from all-night delis to midnight movies. Passers-by ranged from youthful hoodlums bedecked in chains to well-dressed matrons, whose jewels glistened in the neon. Peter saw none of them, his emotions so muddled as to border on numbness, his attention turned inward, forcibly away from the strange hunger which overwhelmed every external sensation.

Yo, Q'utah! Got a question for ya! Peter hailed the nether-entities silently, his mind reaching out to initiate contact. He waited for an answer, not altering his pace. When none was forthcoming, he tried again. *Hey! Anyone there?*

This time the lack of response brought a smile to his lips, little more than a grimace, but as close to genuine as he was capable of coming. *That proves it,* he thought with enough relief to weaken his legs. *They can project and influence, but they can't read my mind. My thoughts are still private and I'm still...Peter Venkman.*

As he walked, he'd been experimenting, and the Q'utah, secure in their power, seemed quite content to allow it in the main. There'd been a ruckus a few times over his attempts to psionically evict them—he'd come so close to succeeding! His training and knowledge in that area made him a formidable opponent; unfortunately, his natural abilities were severely limited, his psi rating above normal but not excessively so. Feeling some semblance of threat, however, the Q'utah had stopped him quickly, using the intense pain they could generate to break his concentration. Given temporary control, they'd used his own body to inflict minor injuries and indignity, non-life threatening, but effective. The episode had been brief, for the Q'utah were still strangers

to his body and inexperienced. Peter had regained the upper hand in seconds, but their influence grew steadily as time progressed, and Peter feared their eventual victory. Since then, he'd moved, walked, forced his body to obey while fighting that eerie hunger that of itself was the most disturbing aspect of the nightmare.

He'd remained underground all day, his one attempt at reaching open air aborted by a phobia so intense the very thought of light had dropped him in a quivering huddle. He'd sensed the Q'utah's hand in the induced terror—a defense mechanism, no doubt—but had been unable to conquer it. Once night had fallen, he'd exited the hated sewers, not knowing where to go or what to do, and too engaged in the struggle for control to care.

"Why are you smiling?" a hated voice asked in the back of his mind. "*You have found something to amuse you?*"

"Just wondering," Peter murmured under his breath, "whether or not I can turn into a bat. That might be fun."

"Your body is slightly enhanced," was the answer. "*Our energy strengthens you. But you are not a shape-changer. Be content to be our servant.*"

Peter didn't reply to that beyond rolling his eyes. Instead, he turned his attention to a smoky window front directly to his left. With the overhead street lamps behind him and the illumination of the great neon sign above, the glass served as a respectable mirror, reflecting back his own image. He studied it closely, wincing at what he saw there. Ruby eyes stared back at him, desperation so clear in their depths as to be nearly painful to behold. The dark brown uniform Peter wore was stained and grimy and stank of the sewer, as did the brown hair that now stood up in unruly spikes all over his head. Peter grimaced, his expression even more sour when his stomach growled in response. "Not only am I starving," he grumbled, running a thumbnail over the nineteen-hour beard shadowing cheeks and jaw, "I look like a derelict. Wonder how many people I scared tonight?"

"The night is ours," one of the parasitic aliens crowed gleefully, expanding Peter's lungs as evidence of the fact. "*We have owned the night of this world for a millennium and one.*"

"Happy birthday," Venkman returned dryly, hate welling up like bile in the back of his throat.

"Thanks. Got me a present, big boy?"

It took a moment for Peter to realize that the voice had originated outside his head and was of a decidedly feminine nature. He turned, directing his step toward an alley only feet away—*Serve the Q'utah right if I got mugged*—then stopping to view the female who waited there. She was petite, no more than five feet without the four-inch heels, and wore her frizzy light hair short. She was also, Peter noted with dismay, about fourteen years old.

"Shouldn't you still be in school?" he quipped, aborting the remark that a decollete neckline did her boyish figure very little justice.

The girl stepped closer, pressing her body full length against his, and anchoring them in place by wrapping her arms intimately around his hips. "I like school, mister. Think you could teach me anything?"

Peter turned so that the streetlamp fell across her face. Despite her years, her eyes were hollowed as though she hadn't slept in days, and there were fine lines crisscrossing her forehead and mouth. Had he wanted to look, Peter was sure he would find the tell-tale tracks of a mainliner—one who injects drugs intravenously. *Crank*, he diagnosed, catching sight of her

pupils by light of a passing truck. *Or ice.* He shook his head sadly. *Such a waste.* Aloud, "Sweetheart, I doubt there's much of *anything* I could teach you."

"*We could teach her,*" a voice interrupted from a point directly behind his eyes. "*Teach her how to die—teach you to feed. We need!*"

Fatigue. Lust. Disgust. Anger. All poured from the girl in waves, her emotions becoming Peter's own. The hunger slammed into him then, worse than before and having nothing to do with the empty state of his stomach. Peter recoiled as though scalded, coming up short against a urine-scented brick wall. "No."

"Yes!"

Unaware of the internal dialogue taking place, the young prostitute moved close again and ran her fingers up and down his arm, stopping at the Ghostbusters insignia sewn onto the sleeve. "Hey, I know who you are! You're one of them guys what catches ghosts, right?" She donned an impish grin, looking heartbreakingly younger. "Wow! I never did a celebrity before! I almost don't want to charge you...much."

Exerting themselves, the Q'utah forced Peter's arms up until they wrapped around the girl, his fingers gouging the flesh of her shoulders. She winced, but didn't pull away. "If you want it rough," she gasped, gulping, "i-it'll cost extra, okay?"

The Q'utah laughed and it was Peter's voice that emerged, a low, grisly chuckle. Peter clamped down on it immediately, concentrating all his attention on his hands. Grimly, he forced his fingers open one by one, releasing the girl and stepping back. "No," he gasped, staggering farther away. "I won't."

That won him a pout. "I'm real good, Mister Ghostbuster. No AIDS or anything." She extended her hand toward his groin and Peter again moved backward, this time reaching the safety of the street.

"I won't let you," he snarled so fiercely that the girl, thinking he was addressing her, also recoiled.

"M-maybe some other time, then," and she was gone, melded with the shadows.

Peter wiped his forehead, resisting an urge that was not his to follow her, and ignoring the screaming rebuke that only he could hear. "*We will have what we need!*" came through loud and clear, as did the low ache of his still-developing canines. "*Our control will grow and you will obey us...forever.*"

Peter believed them. The struggle to release the girl had taken nearly every erg of mental energy he possessed. There was no choice, he needed help and he needed it now. Resolutely, he turned his steps downtown toward the firehouse.

"*We know what you are about,*" the Q'utah whispered, as though it would be hard to guess. "*Your friends cannot help you.*" Peter didn't answer, just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. "*We control you much now,*" the voices went on balefully, a tripled symphony of malice.

"*They will not know anything is wrong.*"

"*We will force you to kill them.*"

Could they? Peter didn't know. He'd nearly killed the girl. He'd *wanted* to kill the girl. But if he waited much longer his control would be completely gone and he'd be a helpless slave. This could be his last chance.

His stride had by now taken him several blocks. He stopped again and stared into the next

window he came to, forcing himself to meet his own eyes there. "I don't want them to see me like this," he whispered with a sense of shame. *They'll never act if they see me like this first—they'll need time to absorb the situation and...I don't want them to see me like this.* He imagined the horrified sympathy that would be on Ray's and Egon's faces, and shuddered. *They'll never defend themselves if they don't have time to prepare. But how much time do I have before I can't control...them?* There was no choice. He would have to take the chance that his friends were sharp enough to act decisively no matter what their feelings.

He gulped and moved on toward Mott Street. "I'm going to tell them what's wrong," he decided, paying no heed to the continued threats from within. "You can't stop me from doing this."

"We will stop you! We will make you rip out their throats! We will make you feed."

Peter ignored them, for the firehouse was now in sight. Fatigued muscles trembled as he fumbled for his key and inserted it in the lock, trepidation long tight in his chest. As expected, the garage was deserted; Janine would have long ago gone home. *She had a hot bath and dinner,* Peter thought enviously, *and is sleeping between clean sheets.* By now even the worried Ghostbusters would have turned in. He made his way upstairs without incident, able to see perfectly even in the near total darkness. Rather than actually changing his body, the Q'utah seemed to have simply reinforced what he already had. Sight, hearing, smell and physical strength were all augmented somehow, and weakened though he felt, Peter could sense some form of energy coursing through his veins, driving him on.

The second floor was dim but not completely dark, lit from without by both streetlamps and business signs. He felt it then, a strange force flaring in his brain like a miniature nova. It grew, then exited invisibly, and he could sense it spreading outward, engulfing his friends. "What just happened?" he asked aloud, puzzled.

This time the Q'utah were silent.

The room, however, was not. Peter followed a snorting sound to the couch and hiked one eye over the backrest. Winston Zeddemore lay full length there, still fully dressed and obviously enjoying the reward of the righteous. Relief washing over him at the sight, Peter reached down and shook one powerful shoulder, receiving for his trouble an impression of dependable foundation and friendship. "Winston?" A light sleeper, the man should have shot up like a rocket; instead, he snorted again and burrowed deeper against the arm of the couch. Frowning, Peter tried again. "Yo! Zed! You in there, booby?" This time there was a response, not from the Negro but from within.

"Do you think us fools?" a voice sneered in his ear. *"We grant the sleep that cannot be broken. We will not let you tell anyone about us. If you try again, we will kill them."* There was a pause as of deliberation. *"This one could not resist if we were to feed,"* came seductively.

"Slimeballs," Peter groaned, tears forming in his eyes. A new thought presented itself. He would have help, if not tonight then come morning! His stomach rumbled, hunger mixing and roiling with need. Without protest from the Q'utah, he made a first stop in the kitchen, ducking into the refrigerator and emerging with an apple. "Vampires are supposed to drink blood," he said aloud. "But I probably need a little more fiber in my diet than that." He ripped off a piece with his canines, chewed and swallowed. To his stomach's delight, it stayed down. "Terr'f'c," he mumbled around another mouthful.

"Your body must eat even as we must feed," the Q'utah informed him, breaking a minutes'

long silence during which Peter finished off not only the apple, but a glass of milk and a bologna sandwich. *"First you feed, then us."*

"Fat chance," Peter growled, dumping his empty glass into the sink. Thinking ahead, he stuffed another apple into his coverall pocket, then directed his step into the living room and to the little desk beside the entertainment center. Without turning on the light, he rummaged in the top drawer and found a pad and pen.

The note was harder to write than Peter had ever imagined it could be. How do you tell your best friends that you are no longer human...maybe even no longer alive? Or worse, that those same friends might have to ensure he *stayed* no longer alive...or functional...whatever. Engrossed in the dual battle of finding his words and fighting the Q'utah's attempts at usurption, he'd started it twice, before a shuffling sound alerted him that he was no longer alone. Reacting instinctively, he melted back behind the circular staircase where the shadows were thickest. The sleepers could not have awakened; intuitively he knew that the Q'utahs' hypnotic command ensured that. A prowler, then, who could be dangerous to his enthralled friends! Tensing, he tracked the unseen figure by sound alone, waiting until it had taken a single step past his position before leaping into action. One well-muscled arm he slipped around the man's neck; the other hand he brought up to cover his mouth, preventing the man from crying out—not that it would have done him any good with the rest of the house comatose.

The intruder struggled mere seconds before going still; rather than striking out, he raised one hand to tap his captor on the arm. Cautiously, Venkman eased his hold enough to hear the whispered, "Peter?"

"Ray?" He spun the other around to find himself peering into a pair of delighted brown eyes above a wide grin. "Ray, what are you doing awake?"

"I couldn't fall asleep tonight. I was worried about you." Ray's gladness spilled over into his voice, his whole face alight. "Where have you been? We've searched *everywhere*." He grasped Peter's forearms and it was only then that Peter realized how painful his own grip must be—his fingers were sunk into Ray's flesh. He closed his eyes briefly, his new psionic powers transmitting a steady wave of gentle affection and concern from the younger man. Peter basked in it, having needed this kind of comfort for far too long. Ray was so open... So much warmth.... And to feed on it directly like this....

With a start, he pried open his fingers and stepped away; touching Ray felt too good right now. It was so easy to...let go. "Ran into a little...trouble," he began, clearing his throat. "Back in the sewer."

"Yes?" Stantz prodded, reaching for a lampswitch. Peter grabbed his wrist, stopping the action, then releasing him immediately.

"Don't. No lights. I can see you well enough."

Ray hesitated, then nodded. "All right." Another pause. "Tell me what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" A bitter smile twisted Peter's lips. "Hope you've got some time—it's quite a list." He deliberately turned away, making sure his features were concealed in the shadows, though it was unlikely anyone without enhanced vision like his own would be able to see more than generalities. The hunger was almost all-consuming now, and growing by the minute. But he had to hold on if he was going to receive the help he needed. A glance into gentle brown eyes brought the realization of just how concerned Ray had been for him—actually frightened, in fact, if the continuing empathics were to be believed. Perhaps the Q'utah could make good on their

threat to force his body to kill his friends. Perhaps not. But he had to hold on—he needed Ray’s expertise if there was to be any end to this nightmare. Besides, he admitted honestly, even aside from technical assistance, Ray’s sympathy and support were exactly what he needed right now.

“What’s wrong?” he repeated, wetting dry lips. “To begin with, I killed a man last night.” Ray drew in his breath in a sharp hiss and reached for Peter’s shoulder, but the psychologist moved away and Ray let his hand fall to his side. “It was an old man, Ray, musta been a hundred if he was a day. Couldn’t even walk much any more. He...stumbled at me out of the shadows and I...shot him.”

Silence draped them, so heavy as to muffle even the living city without. Within its cocoon Peter could hear his own heart, beating loud as thunder.

“Is...that why you left?” Ray asked carefully, clearly at a loss as to how to proceed.

Venkman shook his head. “If it was only that....” A short bark of laughter escaped him, hysteria close, as was the craving. He reined himself in, wrapping his emotions in a jumbled knot; it wouldn’t do to lose it here—not so close to what he needed so badly. “Killing a man was bad enough,” he went on, forcing a note of calm. “But it wasn’t *just* a man that I shot. This man was...possessed.”

“A ghost?” Ray stepped closer, brightening. This was something he could understand. “A human controller or nether-entity?”

“Vampire.”

The word filled the room, bringing with it an indefinable chill that stirred the edges of the consciousness. Peter repeated the word, tasting it as though for the first time. “Or should I say, vampires. There are three of them—old, evil. *Hungry*.”

Cat-sharp vision pierced the gloom easily, though Peter needed no special talent to imagine Ray’s frown. “Vampires,” the engineer echoed blankly. “But vampires aren’t N.E.’s—they’re corporeal beings—humans transformed into the undead. Well, according to legend, anyway. The only ones we ever met were shape-shifters, like Egon said.”

“The Q’utah were never human.” Peter traced patterns idly over the back of the sofa; the nappy material rasped ever so lightly under his fingertips. Oblivious, Winston slept on undisturbed. “A long time ago, they came to our world from...somewhere else. They were the origin of the vampire legends; they bragged that they were the worst of their race to have ever existed until they were driven out by their own...people, for want of a better word.”

“*We killed many*,” the Q’utah gloated, but only Peter could hear.

“The bodies were destroyed?” Ray guessed, peeking over the top of the sofa at the slumbering Zeddemore. “Is he all right?”

Venkman nodded, not smiling when Winston emitted a loud snort and turned over. “He won’t wake up until I’m gone. They have powerful psionic capabilities.” Ray was so close Peter could feel him body and mind; unsettled, he left the couch to take up a stance by the writing desk. “It wasn’t *their* bodies that were destroyed,” he picked up after a minute. “In their own dimension they don’t really have bodies—they inhabit other living beings like parasites. The Q’utah are different from the type of vampires we’ve met; they’re not Bela Lugosi undead. When the host body eventually dies, they move on to another, one after another until....” He stopped, a pain far deeper than physical making his voice shake. It was Ray who finished the sentence.

“Until they got to you.” He came nearer, again reaching for Peter’s shoulder and this time the psychologist did not retreat from his touch. Ray’s hand was warm against his skin, the heat

radiating even through the filthy uniform. There were other sensations, too, love and concern—old bonds washing through the psychologist in waves. Mixed in was one the psychologist recognized as one of his own—the desire to feed. The results were...intoxicating ...and then Peter had again jerked away.

"Hunger!"

"For the love of... Stay away from me!" The command had to be forced, for the last thing in this world or the next Peter Venkman wanted was for Ray to move away. But he made the effort and the words came. "They're here now, Ray," he gritted, clenching his fists. "They want blood—*need* blood to survive and...God forgive me, I think I do, too." He stepped into the weak light from the window and the younger man retreated a single step from the ruby glow which lit Peter's eyes. The gleaming canines were even now over an inch long. "The hunger... hurts. I don't know how long I...can hold...them back."

He turned to flee then, feeling his control nearly gone. Ray moved to intercept him, his white pajamas giving him an unearthly aspect, like a specter himself. "No, Peter, don't go. Not yet."

Unafraid of his friend's transformation, Ray laid his hand on Peter's back, and Peter again tasted the essence within—the pure pulsating life force only millimeters beneath skin. With a start, Peter again jerked free. "You don't understand," he managed, his voice shaking harder. "It's *you* I...they...want. Your blood."

Ray's hesitation lasted a fleeting moment, and then he was turning Peter towards him, his eyes as warm as his skin. "If you leave here, you're going to kill someone. Legend says that if you do, you really *will* be damned...whatever that means."

"No alternative," Peter returned. It was getting difficult to talk over the swelling in his own throat, and his proximity to food...Ray...reduced his concentration to shards. Whether he stayed or not, *They* would soon control completely. "I'm going to be a murderer, Ray...unless you can...end it now?" He examined his friend with a spark of hope dimming the hunger-lust. To be dead was certainly better than being a murderer and a slave. The spark flared and then faded when Ray bit his lip.

"Not right now," he said, spreading both hands apologetically. "I have an *idea* on how to drive them out, but..."

"I said *end* it." Peter grabbed the younger man's shoulders, his expression conveying his meaning more clearly than any words. "Forever."

Dark eyes widened fearfully. "I couldn't do that!"

Peter's hope died. In an abrupt move, he released Ray, shoving him aside. "Then I have to go. If I stay..."

Ray snagged his arm again, hanging on for all he was worth. "You've *got* to stay, Peter. If you leave, you'll kill someone and there won't be anything any of us can do."

"We need the blood," the psychologist intoned defeatedly. "There's no other choice."

Ray smiled gently. "Maybe one other."

Peter attempted to free himself, but the younger man's hold was tenacious. "What do you mean?"

"Me."

Peter stared, that single soft-spoken word fanning the hunger to new heights. He lifted his free hand and placed it on Ray's chest, feeling the thump-thump of a healthy heart against his

palm. Ray was young and strong, his emotions were close to the surface, making them eminently assessable. The meal would be enjoyable.

The words were not his own...and yet they were for Peter, who had been raised by a man who made a living out of deceit and a woman who had learned the hard way not to trust, this lowering of the barriers was an experience never before dreamed. "I can feel *you*," he said, awed. "Every emotion...thought...memory...."

"*He will be good*," the ancient evil rejoiced, forcing Peter to close the distance to their prey. "*Taste him*."

Enchanted by this one-way mental intimacy, Peter obeyed the prodding, running light fingers across Ray's cheek. "I love you, too, Ray," he whispered, responding to the unspoken sentiment, awash in perfectly unshielded affection. "You *are* my little brother in every way that counts." He blinked, the realization of what he was doing slamming into his soul like a speeding locomotive. "Which is why I'm not going to kill you. I'm a vampire, kid; if I stick around, I'll do something I can't help...and neither of us will like it."

Refusing to be persuaded, Ray insistently shook Peter's arm. "You said it yourself—you're not a vampire. You're still human inside—still a *man*. I've trusted that man with my life before; I'm willing to do it again now."

Peter stared, uncomprehending and frightened. "What are you suggesting?"

"You need blood—take mine." Ray smiled shyly at Peter's incredulous look. "I doubt you're going to need more than I can handle, and if you can just make it through tonight...." He left the words dangle, allowing Peter to finish the thought for himself. Tomorrow is another day. Tomorrow Egon and Winston will be involved. Tomorrow brings hope."

"*One boy can do nothing*," the entities boasted. "*Three even less. Our power has conquered centuries*."

Peter raised his right hand and very gently cupped Ray's jaw and cheek. "Do you know what you're offering?" he rasped. "Or what you're risking? If I can't stop...."

Ray swallowed hard, but nodded without reservation. "It's your only chance. You take just enough to survive. That'll buy us the time we need to help you."

There was no answer to that, and no time to seek another. "*Ours!*" the Q'utah crowed, exerting themselves more strongly than ever before. Peter hesitated one split second, long enough to peer deeply into those trusting amber eyes. "R—" And the Q'utah took him. Control vanished entirely, leaving nothing but the fire which seared every nerve and embraced this willing sacrifice to the flames.

He pulled Ray closer, again feeling that outrush of mental energies like a hot wind. Ray came to him unresistingly, lifting his chin to allow Peter access to his throat. Peter bit down immediately and Ray jerked aside, Peter's new fangs digging into shoulder muscles and skin. Ray gasped at the sudden pain, but did not pull away. His eyes were dulling under the Q'utah's psionic assault, and he spoke dreamily, as if distracted. "Promise me, Peter," he mumbled. "Promise that you'll always come back to *me* for blood rather than touch anyone else."

Peter licked his lips lightly, maddened beyond bearing. "Sure," he muttered, slashing downward again. Ray cried out softly, but did not move, locked as he was now in some type of semi-aware state.

Tooth parted skin and rich dark fluid filled Peter's mouth; he tasted it, sputtered and spat it out. *Ugh!* Revulsion filled him and bafflement. The hunger was there, why couldn't he drink?

Wasn't that what vampires were *supposed* to do? Even as he asked, the Q'utah drove him to sink his teeth into Ray's throat again, this time slashing deeper and allowing the blood to trail down the younger man's neck and chest. It was then that Peter understood—the appetite was for more than the coppery-salt of blood; rather, it was for emotions and feelings, thoughts and memories—the very essence of the man himself that Peter now fed upon. In his heightened empathic state, he experienced all that made up the being named Ray Stantz, felt it soak into his own substance to become a part of him, flowing with the steady rush of blood which was now staining the carpet. Emotions not his own filled him, carrying him along on a tidal wave of love and affection and the simple unwavering trust that was Ray Stantz.

Memories rose as the entwining continued. Peter found himself in two places at once—both watching and experiencing. He was Peter Venkman and he was also incredibly small, waving tiny fists to the sky. He tasted warmed milk from a glass bottle and gazed adoringly up at a pretty, sharp-featured woman named "Mom." Long, curly red hair trailed over fragile white shoulders, and there were lines of anxiety etched around her mouth and bright green eyes.

The farm house was visible through the dirty barn window; it was whitewashed and barren, set against the gently rolling hills of New York State. He/they refocussed, using the glass as a reflecting mirror; a child peered back, about six years old, small with huge eyes and an unkempt shock of red-brown hair. He had to be quiet; if he made a sound then Mr. Hanley would catch him here in the barn. He held up his newest acquisition—a Captain Steel comic book—examining the cover by the light of the dying sun. Young muscles ached, having been worked too hard, but there was also the singular happiness that came from these few minutes' escape from unkind reality into the fantasy world of blue-uniformed superheroes, who spoke to little boys with kindness, and lived nobly, a place where love was more than a hopeless hurt.

He/they looked up, startled by a shadow, quivering at the appearance of a whipcord lean man with a weathered face. Marble hard eyes regarded the youthful ones unsmilingly, even as the newcomer snapped a leather belt against his palm. "On a farm indolence is a sin," he grated, striding forward. "I know how to learn youngsters better." Something hurt and the pretty dream world crashed to a halt.

*He was thirteen—his thirteenth birthday, in fact—and possessed of a brand new winter coat, courtesy of Great Aunt Lois. None of Ernest's hand-me-down coats this winter! he cheered, running his fingers across the navy blue wool. It's so warm! And it fits! It fits **me**! Beaming with joy, he bent his back to his task, that of tossing hay into the stalls for the livestock. Though it had to be just past dawn, there was no weariness in this work; hard labor had produced strong arms and powerful shoulders, and the exertion was more pleasure than strain.*

He breathed deep the clean rural air, enjoying the dual fragrances of vegetation and animal. Guess Old Man Hanley was right, Peter thought with no lessening of disgust for the man. Indolence on a farm doesn't pay. "Hello, Lorna."

The greeting was made tenderly in a high, childish voice, and answered by a quiet lowing from beyond the first stall. A russet head popped over the top, placid dark eyes regarding him with what passed as bovine adoration. The cow accepted the carrot gracefully, returning a

sloppy kiss by way of thanks.

Another picture superimposed itself even as the barn faded: that of Peter himself as a much younger man, handsome and proud and brilliant in the eyes of the sixteen-year-old boy who'd asked him directions on campus one day. Peter both saw and was himself, idealized and almost inhumanly perfect, much as that nearly-forgotten comic book hero had been so many years before. The effect was both embarrassing and flattering at once.

All this Peter lived in an instant, these images and a thousand others flowing around him and through him in a river. Yet, as vital as these were, it was the emotions which Peter savored most; morsel by delicious morsel they grew, filling him to overflowing with the loving friendship which had grown over the course of half a lifetime. Peter saw-felt-sensed and knew himself to be beloved, and the returning tenderness rose to mingle in his heart. There was something else now: a fear-flavor that had not been there before. It, too, was delicious, an exotic spice added to the meal. Dimly, from somewhere very far away, he heard a soft voice pleading with him for...something...over and over, but the entities within told him to ignore it, and the sensations were so delightful that he was only too happy to oblige. Soon the pleading faded away, leaving only the spice. Intoxicated by these new sensations, Peter Venkman gave himself over, revelling in the sheer exhilaration of the feed.

A long time later, when his mind and heart could hold no more and the Q'utah had lapsed into sated silence, he raised his head with a sigh. "I feel good," he grunted, spitting his mouth clean. "Strong—replenished. Good." He opened his eyes then and the words that he had intended to speak—that he was grateful for the gift, that he loved Ray as much as he'd sensed the return—choked him at the first sight of his friend. The only thing holding Ray Stantz upright were Peter's arms locked around his chest and waist, for by all appearances the young man was long unconscious...or worse. The auburn head hung back limply, exposing the slashed throat, chalk white face and blue lips forming a stark contrast to the blood which soaked the fronts of both Ray's white pajamas and Peter's dirty brown uniform. Alarmed, Peter shook him roughly.

"Ray?" he called anxiously, his words still slurred by the long canines. The younger man did not so much as stir and Peter shook him again, harder. "Come on, kid, say something!" But there was no reply save the shallow, raspy breathing that converted the liquid fire in Peter's veins into barren ice.

Stricken, Peter pulled his friend closer, supporting him carefully in his arms, allowing the lolling head to roll forward against his chest. "I didn't mean it, Ray," he babbled, laying his cheek against disordered auburn hair. "I didn't know how to stop!" He stiffened, casting his eyes heavenward. "He trusted me."

"*The boy always was a fool,*" an amused voice answered from within his own head. "*You've said as much yourself.*"

"Only when it came to trusting me," Peter retorted, a tear slipping from his ruby eyes and trailing down his face. With an abrupt gesture, he swept Ray up as he would a child; to his revitalized muscles the man's weight was insignificant. "Egon!" he thundered, abandoning the slumbering Zeddemore for the spiral staircase. "Egon! Wake up!"

Neither he nor Winston so much as stirred at his beckon. "Tell me how to wake them up," Peter demanded harshly. "Or I'll take Ray to the emergency room myself."

"It is nearly dawn," a voiceless voice replied. *"The sun rises. We can not permit ourselves to be trapped by the light."*

"It can destroy you as well," another added harshly. *"After the change, you became as vulnerable as we."*

"You think that's going to stop me?" Peter retorted, privately wondering if that were truth or lie and not particularly caring either way. Suicide by lethal suntan held a certain macabre attraction at this point. The Q'utah must have had long experience with this reaction, however, for suddenly he was shaking, filled with such a phobic loathing of even the thought of Earth's golden star that he nearly bolted then and there. He caught himself at the last moment, the feeling of Ray's body in his arms giving him the tenacity to tarry. "This is Ray's life I'm talking about."

The third entity laughed. *"It is nothing to us if the boy dies, or to you any longer. There are others where he came from who walk the city streets. We will feed well."*

That fueled Peter's temper like nothing else could have. "Someday you'll all fall," he grated. "When that happens, I intend to be there to watch."

"But your friend will not," the second voice taunted. *"And his death bonds you to us forever."*

That brought Peter's mind back to the limp form he was clasping so tightly to his chest. Ray's breathing was becoming even more labored, and the bluish tinge to his lips was even now extending itself to the rest of his face. "Hang on, kid," he whispered. "I'll get you help no matter what it costs."

The entities rebelled then, sending a single thread of vitriol through his nervous system. Peter gasped, his concentration splintered by the pain. The Q'utah used the opportunity to direct his steps back across the room toward the garage access. Still carrying Ray, Peter staggered several yards before he could reclaim himself; he dug in his heels, bringing them all to a halt. "Not...until he's...safe," he snarled, reversing his course.

The background muttering inside his skull grew, but the pseudo-vampires were unable to prevent his climb to the third-floor bunkroom; accepting the futility in this particular attempt, the vitriol cooled, leaving Venkman limp with relief. "Tell me how to wake them up," he commanded, making his way to the bunkroom. Bootheels clumped across the hardwood floor, stopping when he'd reached Egon's bedside. The physicist lay sprawled on his back, arms spread at his sides and an expression of utter serenity on his face. Across the room, floating lightly above the foot of Ray's bed, Slimer snored loudly, and Peter sighed, enjoying the familiar sights and sounds of his erstwhile residence. *Beats the sewer,* he thought dryly, catching a whiff of his own clothes. Aloud, "Tell me how to wake them!" But there was no reply from the entities, and the sleepers continued to sleep.

Peter clenched his teeth, sickened anew by the drop of blood which rolled off of Ray's soaked pajama's to stain Egon's sheets crimson. Infuriated, he kicked out, actually moving Egon's bed several feet though disturbing the physicist not at all. Across the room, Slimer grunted something and flipped over in mid air, pulling his glow-in-the-dark blanket tighter around his neck. "There has to be a solution," Venkman stated firmly. "I'm not going to let Ray die." He stood for a moment, considering his options. "If I leave, the psionic control keeping Egon and Winston asleep will fade, but there's no guarantee that either of them will wake up naturally

before morning. Even if they do, they may not think to check on Ray before—" The words, "—it's too late," added themselves to his sentence of their own volition. He dismissed them instantly. "*Never* too late," he said with a fierce determination.

Coming to a decision, he very gently lay Ray on the bed next to Spengler, positioning him in the crook of one sinewy arm. He smiled slightly as Egon, murmuring in the throes of some dream, turned towards the young engineer and draped his free arm across Ray's chest, holding him securely in place. "You're gonna make someone a great mother, Spengs." Satisfied, Peter straightened and laid his hand on Ray's forehead. "Hang on, kiddo. Just a little longer."

With that, he loosened the desperate control he was maintaining and allowed the entities to bustle him down the stairs and out the door, delaying them only long enough to pick up the pay phone across the street. He dialed "0," waiting impatiently until the operator answered. "Yes, ma'am, I'd like to make a collect call....The number? 555-BUST. And let it ring, will you? They may still be...asleep."

* * *

The phone jangled insistently, a raucous summons that rose above the steady city sounds to shatter the night. With a low curse, Winston abandoned the lavatory, buttoning his pajamas as he moved. He staggered into the bunkroom and snapped on the overhead light, brushing a hovering Slimer curtly aside. "Four-thirty," he growled, padding to the phone while vigorously scrubbing his eyes with one hand. "Not even dawn and... Whadda'ya want?... Hello?" He listened a moment, then slammed the receiver down with a snarl.

"W-Winston."

"Lousy crank calls at...." Zeddemore turned, his words trailing off at first sight of the still horizontal Egon Spengler and the reason for the utter horror which creased the physicist's angular features.

Now, waking up to find one's best friend lying in one's arms isn't necessarily an unpleasant thing. Oh, it may be a bit of a surprise and he'd better have a *very* good reason for being there, but it needn't cause more than a minor stir in one's morning if handled right.

But wake up to find one's best friend not only lying in one's arms, but also quietly bleeding his life out onto one's linen, and all bets are off. This Egon found out the hard way. He had awakened at the first ring of the phone, lazy and comfortable and unwilling to bestir himself. Slowly, he became aware first of a warm weight pinning his left arm to the bed, and second that he was holding someone very tightly against his side. "Doesn't *feel* like Janine," he'd muttered, instinctively snuggling closer. It was at that moment Winston switched on the light and Spengler got his first look at the auburn hair tickling his chin. Puzzled if unalarmed, he lifted his head, blinking myopically at the visitor, craning to see the other's face. "Who? Ray?"

There was something sticky soaking into the arm draped across Ray's chest; Egon frowned and released the younger man, lifting it for a closer inspection. Even without his glasses he could tell it was viscous and red. Blood.

Egon's eyes went wide, horror freezing him where he lay. "W-Winston?

"Ray?" Slimer wailed, taking one look at the unconscious Ghostbuster and zooming

around the ceiling like a green bat. "*Ray's dead!*"

Breaking his trance, Winston crossed the intervening space in three strides, banging his shin painfully against the nightstand in his haste. "What happened?" he demanded, managing to hand Spengler his glasses while hopping on one foot.

"I...I don't know." Egon carefully donned his glasses, grimacing at the scarlet drops which rolled off the silk sleeve of his nightshirt as he moved. He touched his mouth, then examined his fingers suspiciously. "I-I didn't...?"

"*Course* you didn't," Winston snapped, levering his arm under Ray's shoulders. "It looks like he was put here after you were asleep." He lifted the limp form, waiting until Spengler had extricated himself before laying the engineer gently down again and wrapping his fingers around Ray's wrist. "Cold, clammy skin...racing pulse. Shock. Call an ambulance, Egon. Fast."

"*Shock!*" Slimer echoed, coming to light on the footboard. "*Ray's dying! Yucky red.*"

"Blood loss?" Egon asked, striving valiantly to recover his aplomb while silently agreeing with Slimer's evaluation. Zeddemore nodded. "Bad?"

"Bad as I've ever seen." He exchanged a worried look with the blond before turning his attention back to Stantz. "Slimer, go fetch the first aid kit out of the bathroom; I'll see what I can do to stop him losing any more blood."

"What there is of it," Egon murmured, picking up the phone.

While Egon dialed, Winston collected pillows from three of the beds, shoving them under Ray's knees, thus bringing his legs higher than his heart. Slimer was back in seconds bearing a white and red tin in both hands. Winston cleaned the slime off with a sheet, then opened the lid and extracted the gauze pads; these he pressed against Ray's throat, holding them firmly but gently in place. This ministrations produced the barest tinge of color in Ray's face but little beyond that—the young man's breathing came in ever shallower gasps, and his lips were still blue. "Egon?" Winston called, interrupting the other's rapid-fire speech into the phone.

Spengler placed his hand over the receiver to shoot his comrade a frightened look. "What is it?"

Zeddemore met that look grimly. "Tell them to hurry," he said quietly. "I don't think Ray's got much longer to live."

* * *

It was evening.

How he knew this Peter was unable to explain, but there was something inside of him, some internal clock that reminded him as if with gentle chimes that the sun had set and he should be about.

"*To hunt,*" the Q'utah prodded. "*To feed. To experience life.*"

"Someone else's life," Peter snapped, nerves strung tight as wires.

"*It becomes ours,*" the beings replied with growing urgency. "*It is enough.*"

Peter gritted his teeth, feeling two of them cutting into his lower lip. "Why not tell me what you did with Ray this morning? It obviously wasn't blood you were after, so why run the vampire scam?"

"Vampires cause fear," one told him with a chuckle. *"We could have lengthened your nails instead of your teeth but there is no fear in that. Fear tastes best."*

"Dying opens the pathways of the mind," another added. *"A slow death allows us time to savor the feed."*

"We say a man's life passes before his eyes when he dies," Peter murmured, touching the new fangs with his forefinger. He shuddered at the remembered feeling of them slicing through the exposed flesh, could taste again the coppery salt of Ray's blood filling his mouth. He spat involuntarily and wiped his mouth on one crud-infested sleeve. They hadn't needed blood at all—even now Peter's stomach churned at the remembrance of the sticky fluid filling his mouth. Ray had bled his life away for Peter's sustenance, yet it had ended up all on the living room carpet. All for their enjoyment.

"Time to hunt," echoed urgently inside his own skull. *"Time to feed."*

Peter's leg twitched as a prelude to standing. Forcibly, he controlled it, fighting off the Q'utah's bid by exerting his iron will to the utmost. "Not this time, bunkies," he snarled, wrapping his arms around his pulled up knees. "We're staying right here until morning. I'm not hurting anyone else."

He concentrated on breathing. In. Out. In. One could almost get used to the sewer smell if one was exposed to it long enough. Almost. Peter's nostrils flared testing this hypothesis, an explosive sneeze the only result. Definitely worse than a catbox; the stench was overpowering. Rodents and insects scampered across his body at will; he'd tried to brush them away at first, but sunrise had brought with it a curious lassitude that numbed even the disgusted horror of the vermin. He was huddled on a cement shelf above the water level and six feet underground—*Appropriate*, he thought dryly—safe from the dreaded sunlight that baked the tarmac overhead.

He'd slept fitfully all day, nightmares inhabiting both sleeping and waking time. The Q'utah, fortunately, had grown passive save for a background pressure against his skull. He knew they were there, but his consciousness was inviolate...he hoped...and his actions, for the moment, were his own.

Finding some measure of solace in that thought despite the fact that his body was screaming at him for care, he dug out the apple he'd stuffed into his pocket that morning. It was seeping juice and shriveled, but Peter was so hungry he couldn't have cared less. Nibbling at it around his fangs, he devoured the fruit inside of a minute flat. It sat in the pit of his stomach like lead, filling the void there but not salving his hunger one iota. His body may have required food, but the Q'utah—and Peter—required far more.

Nausea at least temporarily assuaged, Peter allowed himself to drift, replaying the occurrences of the dawn in his mind. For a brief second he was again Ray Stantz, enthusiastic and boyish and trusting. *How can anyone be that eternally cheerful after living with those people for ten years?* But the winter sunlight was warm on his face and there was a gentleness in his heart for the small life entrusted to his care. *Maybe farm life isn't quite as bad as I thought*, Peter conceded but only to himself. The gentleness extended and grew, and Peter again felt it directed towards himself, and was both humbled and touched at the depth of devotion the younger man felt for him. *For me*, Peter thought, having to swallow a lump in his throat. *I always knew how much the kid cared, but it's not the same as feeling it like this.* He started to relax, letting Ray's warmth wash over him, admitting the reverse to be also true: he cared for Ray every bit as much—more—than if they'd actually been *born* brothers. *Blood brothers now*, he thought bit-

terly, letting Ray's affection soothe away his pain. *Wish I could have felt Egon like that. Right now I need him even worse than Ray.*

The mental reflecting pool rippled and he was again himself, standing stiff legged and rejuvenated, holding the limp body of his young friend in his arms. His heart wrenched with anguish, his hands were saturated with blood.

With a bang, the vision ended. Peter jerked bolt upright, sick with worry for Ray and filled with revulsion at himself. Dried blood crackled in his clothing as he huddled smaller against the damp chill. Was Ray...gone? He remembered Winston's voice on the phone, clinging to the memory of that strong baritone and drawing what comfort he could from its mellow tones. Winston was security—a strong wall at his back. He'd've known what to do to help Ray. And if Winston was awake, then Egon was, too. They could not have helped but notice Ray—Egon certainly couldn't! Peter had hung up reluctantly on Winston's angry demand for identification, then ducked into the nearest manhole. The last thing he'd heard before vanishing into the veritable bowels of the earth was the frantic wailing of a siren heading toward the garage. Had it been in time to save Ray? Or had Stantz succumbed to the brutalities of the night and become what Egon's prediction had named him: an animated corpse, bereft of life?

No. Peter refused to accept that. Didn't the very fact that he so craved a return to the young man prove that Ray was still alive?

"We hunger."

"You hunger, too, boy."

Hunger. Peter huddled farther back in his alcove, and licked his lips. He was ravenous—worse than before. Not only physically but...empty. The hunger ached and consumed and Peter knew within his soul that the only relief lay in the half-dead form of his dearest friend. Peter wanted.

"No," he whispered, unfolding from his ball and standing. "Ray is my friend."

"You need only taste," a voice whispered persuasively. *"Touch and taste."*

"He wants you to come," another prodded, sending enough fire through Peter's veins to stagger him. *"He waits. Dreams of your coming."*

"Go to him and we shall relate to you the Q'utah."

Weakened and confused by the assault, Peter again drowsed, waking to find himself stumbling down a back alley in a section of town he didn't recognize, his mind filled with alien images and knowledge that filled him with dejection.

"How did I get here?" he asked, unable to process so much information at once. "Where am I?"

"The hunt is on!" The Q'utah talked all at once, babbling their pleasure at the concept. The cacophony was mind-numbing, Peter's psionics increasing with the parasites' excitement. His mind expanded, encompassing his surroundings. He sensed the young couple behind the nearest wall, experienced their joy at welcoming their first child into the world. The next building housed a man who had just murdered a child. Peter flinched away from his perverted pleasures, though the Q'utah reached out eagerly.

"Him!" they crowed even as Peter regained enough control to turn and flee. He walked for a long time, from alley to busy street, his hunger growing into a consuming madness. Red spots swirled before his eyes and he must have blacked out, for, the next thing he knew, he was in another featureless alley, with a young woman in a short skirt backed up against the wall. Her

eyes were glazing over as Ray's had when Peter's teeth had descended on the young man's unprotected throat. She wouldn't feel a thing...until it was time for the fear spice to be added.

He recoiled, hesitated, and neared the unresisting woman again, brushing his fingers along her cheek. She was young, vibrant, full of life, and her energies crooned to him sweetly of desire and gaiety. He opened his mouth, fascinated by the little smile that touched the woman's lips, disgusted by what he was doing. *I'm going to kill her*, he thought with horror. He stopped, weighing alternatives, then made his decision, carefully and deliberately. *Sorry, lady, but it's you or Ray, and I don't want to hurt Ray again.* In the background of his thoughts, the Q'utah cheered him on...then went silent. Peter's lips touched soft, white skin...and froze.

"I can't take you," he said wonderingly, backing away. The woman made a soft little sound of protest as he withdrew, blinking her way out of her entrancement. "The Q'utah can't use you. Why?"

"Why...uh...what?" she answered, becoming fully aware. "Who are you? What happened?" She got her first good look at Peter, her mouth becoming a large "O" of astonishment. "Who—?"

Peter ignored her, glad she hadn't started to scream. *He* might have started to scream had he found himself being accosted by a wild-eyed, grime-and-blood encrusted man who smelled of the sewers. For the Q'utah, the woman ceased to exist. They grumbled to themselves, forcing Peter's legs to carry them to safety. "Why couldn't I take her?" Peter asked aloud, ignoring the strange look this got him from a passing muscleman in a flannel shirt.

The low mumbling ceased, growing into clear speech. "*This is all the boy's fault,*" one growled in the back of his thoughts. "*We should have made sure to have finished him off. Now we are bound.*"

The boy? Did they mean Ray? "What are you talking about?" Peter slowed his stride now that the woman had been left far behind. "What does this have to do with Ray?"

"*The boy has bound us,*" the Q'utah returned angrily. "*It is a blood oath even we cannot break.*"

"*We must return to him now,*" another put in, no less furious at this turn of events. "*We are bound.*"

Blood oath? Peter bit his lip, concentrating furiously on this cryptic statement. Vaguely the memories drifted back to the pre-dawn hours. Blood oath. He remembered a promise Ray had coerced from him in his moment of madness.

"*Promise me, Peter,*" Ray's voice begged from far away. "*Promise that you'll always come back to me for blood rather than touch anyone else.*"

Peter had sworn even as he'd drawn first blood. A blood oath. The combination must have been binding on such interdimensional creatures even as Stantz had suspected. Peter admired the younger man's cool-headedness. *A neat trap, kid*, he applauded, bringing his hands together twice.

Come back to me. Back to Ray. If he was still alive.

Clarified, the pull grew directional. Peter was no longer drawn to personalities along the way. His steps turned of their own accord to the west, some sixth sense telling him that that was the direction Ray Stantz lay. The pull was strong, the temptation great. Ray's touch, Ray's warmth filling his veins, Ray's past flashing behind his closed lids, Ray's....

Ray's life.

Ray was still alive. That was something. But as the Q'utah's chosen target, how long would he remain that way?

* * *

Winston Zeddemore paced the small private room in constricted arcs, his path taking him around the bed occupying the middle of the floor. Nearly twenty-four hours of wakefulness on top of only a few hours' rest the night before had taken their toll on the robust Ghostbuster, reddening his eyes and bowing his shoulders. A quick shower and change of clothes before assuming his shift here had provided only temporary refreshment—too temporary to have lasted this long.

He interrupted his restive pacing to glance at his watch, brows furrowed. The hands stood at four a.m.; already the sounds of a hospital gearing up for the morning routines penetrated the low-lit refuge. Winston sighed, paced another two steps and again came to a halt. "Never did like waiting," he mumbled, running a hand through his short curls. "It's the waiting that's starting me gray."

Brown eyes narrowed as he examined the room as he had every few minutes since night-fall; it remained comfortably undisturbed. Still, the black war vet took another turn in place, dark features creased with worry. "Don't know what it is," he continued aloud. "Maybe that last cup'a coffee is making me antsy?" He pursed his lips, his gaze lighting on the still form inhabiting the raised bed: Ray Stantz.

Zeddemore approached the bed, staring down at his friend. Ray lay on his side, right arm stretched out to accommodate the IV needle that was conveying some clear fluid into a puckered vein. Tangled auburn hair haloed a face that was pale, but not bluish-gray as it had been the previous dawn. Transfusions, fluids and treatment had restored a blush to his cheeks and eased the labored breathing into easy respiration and undistressed rest.

"Not a good thing, little brother." He rested a hand on the auburn head, gently so as to not wake the sleeper. "If Peter really is coming back for you like you said, I...." He trailed off, focus shifting from Ray's face to the proton pack that waited at the foot of the bed, within Winston's reach at all times. The implication in the man's anguished expression was clear—Peter would not finish the job he'd begun the night before. Whatever it took.

Zeddemore started, disturbed out of his grim musings when a stocky nurse knocked once on the door and peeked in. "Mr. Zeddemore? There's a telephone call for you. Lieutenant Frump."

Winston hesitated, darting a glance from the woman to Ray and back again. "How far is the phone?" he asked her in a low voice. "I don't really want to leave right now."

She jerked a thumb to her left. "Nurses station. Right over there."

Winston bit his lip. "Guess I'd better take it, he might have some news on Peter. Could you stay here a minute, Miss?"

The nurse regretfully shook her head. "Sorry. I'm the only one manning the station right now. Can't leave."

She disappeared even as Zeddemore sighed and turned to the young man on the bed.

"Hey," he called softly, shaking Ray's shoulder. "Wake up."

Stantz stirred, then rolled over onto his back to regard the black man blearily. "Wha—? Winston. Is Peter...?"

Winston patted him soothingly. "Nothing's wrong, homeboy. I have to leave the room for a minute to take a phone call from Lieutenant Frump. I want you awake until I get back."

Ray struggled up onto one elbow, apprehension dispelling the sleep in short order. "Lieutenant Frump? Is it about Peter? Did they find him?"

Broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "That's what I'm going to find out. I hate leaving you alone...."

Stantz dismissed that with a wave. "Go ahead, Winston, nothing's going to happen in just a few minutes. I'll be all right."

Zeddemore hesitated again, then nodded. "I'll be back in jig time and Egon's due in any minute now. If you see or hear *anything* weird, let out a yell, got it?"

Ray stretched, a grin curling his lips. "They'll be able to hear me all the way in New Jersey." The grin faded, replaced by worried disquiet. "But if Peter needs me...."

That brought a spark of anger to the older man. He took Ray's shoulders, leaning close until they were nose-to-nose. "I thought we settled this already. Peter *needed* you last night and you almost died. We're not taking any more chances until Egon's got things worked out. Understand?" Stantz stared back mutely, large eyes wide. Interpreting that as agreement, Winston released him. "Frump is on hold; I'll be right back."

He crossed to the door and disappeared through it, leaving a visibly worried engineer behind. Had Winston known what had been impatiently awaiting his departure, he might well have let the policeman hold forever.

Ray sat up straighter in bed, rubbing tired eyes, then allowed his fingers to trail down over the bandages swathing his shoulder and throat. "Peter." The name was spoken softly, sadly, even as the amber eyes lost their focus and began to glaze. "Peter," was repeated, this time blankly. Something tapped on the window drawing his attention; he looked, already not completely aware if not entranced, blinking his surprise to see the face of Peter Venkman peeping back at him. "Peter? Is that you?"

The tapping noise came again even as Peter gestured toward the closed pane. Ray slipped over the side of the bed, swaying dizzily as his bare feet touched the floor. He clung to the lowered safety rail for a moment and shut his eyes, taking a deep breath. The renewed tapping brought him around; he staggered to the window, snatching something from the nighttable en route.

"Let me in!" Peter's voice was muffled by the glass but still clear. Ray cocked his head, dazedly following the other's pointing finger to the sash. Obediently, he turned the catch and lifted the window wide, allowing Peter Venkman access.

"Thought he'd never leave," Peter muttered, climbing into the room. "I've been hanging onto that drainpipe for almost an hour."

"Is it really you?" Ray stared wonderingly at the nearly unidentifiable psychologist, from filthy spiked brown hair to sewer-and-blood-damp uniform and slimy boots, his gaze trailing up again to the man's face. Peter was as pale as Ray himself, his green eyes glittering with ruby overtones and filled with so much anguish as to be unbearable to look upon. "You look awful."

A tiny smile appeared and vanished. "You don't look so hot yourself, pal," Peter gibed

back, taking in the pale face, long hospital gown and wobbly stance in one sweep. He touched the white bandages on Ray's neck, pulling them off in a single agitated motion; the flesh beneath was fiery colored and swollen, black sutures standing out grotesquely. "Did a pretty good job on you, didn't I?" Stantz didn't answer, but Peter cocked his head in a listening attitude, face crumpling with distress. "They want... I...almost killed you."

Sympathetic through the growing numbness blanking his own features, Ray reached out to him, wrapping both arms roughly around his neck. "Peter, don't worry. It'll be all right."

Looking surprised at the gesture, Peter nevertheless returned the embrace, locking around Ray's chest and waist as he'd done the previous dawn. "You made me come back here," he growled, eyes now more red than green at the proximity to his prey. "I wanted to take someone else...didn't want to hurt you again." Ray stiffened at the gruff tone and tried to pull back, but Peter's grip was steel, his enhanced muscles easily defeating the younger man's weakened and less-than-fully-aware retreat. "You shouldn't have made me come back to you."

"Peter..." Stantz stopped struggling, his breathing growing faster even as what little color had returned to his face at the other's appearance fled. His legs gave out suddenly, leaving him dangling in Peter's grip; the psychologist lowered them both until they were sitting on the floor.

"I can feel you again," Peter said wonderingly, lifting his head to meet Ray's wide eyes. "You're afraid." The younger man shook his head once but Peter held up a hand, cutting off the protest. "I'm an empath, Ray—that's how I...they feed. All we're reading from you right now is..." he swallowed, the fire in his eyes banking into emerald regret, "...that you're afraid of us...of me."

Ray stared at the protrusions that were once Peter's own teeth. He shivered and looked away, at the same time clapping a hand to his neck. Peter licked his lips. "They...the Q'utah...they like it when you're afraid. It tastes...good." This last was more hiss than vocalism and Ray, sinking deeper into induced stupor, shuddered.

"Not your fault, Peter." This was whispered and absent, yet must have come from the heart considering the young man's surface consciousness was rapidly decaying. "Not..." The normally oft voice was so low as to be barely audible, but it was enough to stop Peter cold.

"No!" Low, intense, the words were as quiet as Ray's, yet conveying the anguish of a soul already lost. Peter threw back his head, plea directed ceilingward. "Please. Don't hurt him." And from his own mouth came the guttural answer, "The boy dies by his own blood oath."

"The boy better not be hurt," a new voice snarled from the doorway. Peter snapped his head toward that low baritone, baring his teeth at the sight of Winston Zeddemore's powerful frame blocking the entrance. They regarded each other across the space of a dozen feet, ruby eyes enraged, dark brown filled with pain. "Ray told us what happened," Winston went on in a quiet voice. "Pete, are you still in there?"

Venkman hesitated, then nodded slowly. "I-I'm here, Winston," he managed, obviously having to fight to get the words out. Very gently, he deposited Ray on the floor and gained his feet, hands spread in supplication. "Help...him. Stop me."

Winston clenched his jaw. "I'll do my best, buddy." In a sudden motion, he made a dive for the bed and the proton pack sitting there. Peter, however, was faster by far. In a single bound, he'd crossed the intervening space and snatched up the pack, tearing it out of Zeddemore's grasp and heaving it against the far wall.

"You won't stop us," he spat, circling the bed to get at the defiant Negro. "We will have

him, then we will be free.”

“Not *us*,” Winston said, backing away and raising both hands placatingly. “*Peter*. Peter Venkman. I know you’re there. Fight them!”

But the psychologist only continued to advance. “He has fought us long enough!” he said in guttural tones, balling his fist. Winston, no tyro to battle strategy, got there first, his haymaker right cross snapping Peter’s head back and nearly knocking him to the ground. Peter, however, was unstoppable. The psychologist recovered before the black could set up a second blow, his own backhand sending Zeddemore clear over the bed to crash into the concrete outer wall. Winston landed with a “Whuff!” of escaping air; he didn’t get back up.

Peter watched him narrowly for a full minute before dismissing the incident and returning to the huddled engineer. Completely unaware now, Ray half-sat, half-lay against the wall beneath the window, his head thrown back and the swollen skin on his throat fully exposed. At the sight, the ruby obliterated emerald in Peter’s eyes, the fires of madness blazing anew. With exquisite care, he gathered the young man up, cradling him in one arm, and using his free hand to stroke the unshaven cheek in a curiously gentle gesture that was entirely Peter Venkman. One emotion after another chased itself across his lean features, driven under an empathic impact a millennium old. Joy and affection trailed loneliness and grief, feelings and sensations from without fueling the life force that now animated his body.

“Ours,” he chanted, parting his lips; the fangs gleamed whitely in the light. “Boy. Farm. Parents. Death. The prey is ours. Mine.” Ray sighed brokenly and a single beam of sanity intruded long enough for Peter to say, “I’m sorry,” then his mouth descended brutally on the unprotected throat, razor fangs ripping through stitches and damaged flesh. Blood spurted, flowing freely, and Peter closed his eyes as the Q’utah began to feed.

Lost in the psionic feed, Peter’s lips curled in blissful ecstasy, strength almost visibly returning to his body. Ray whimpered once and then was silent, eyes fixed vacantly as his life’s blood coursed away. Several minutes passed—long enough for Peter’s cheeks to grow rosy and Ray’s ashen, while a scarlet puddle formed around them both.

It was sound that disturbed them, a harsh buzzing noise that violated the quiet tomb in which they were interred. Startled, Peter jerked upright, nearly spilling Ray onto the tiles, then catching himself in time. He peered around perplexed, gaze finally lighting on Ray’s loosely closed right hand. Peter opened the fingers and lifted the offending object into view.

“An alarm watch!” he exclaimed, astonished out of the blood frenzy. “Smart kid!” He shook his head, eyes clearing, next statement directed internally. “Sorry, slimeballs, you had your shot. Peter’s back now!” Tightening his fist eliminated the rude noise—and, incidentally, the watch. Peter let the fragments drop unheeded, then shifted his attention to the inert figure he clutched in his left arm, the fear this time generated within. Tenderly, he touched Ray’s hair, grimacing at the blood still soaking the cotton hospital gown and Peter’s own uniform. “Don’t trust me *now*, do you?” he asked bitterly, having to blink away sudden tears. “With good reason.”

Once again surprised out of inattention by a noise from the door, Peter glanced up, this time meeting anguished blue eyes behind red framed glass. Egon stepped all the way into the room, glancing nervously from the out-of-range proton pack to Winston’s unmoving form, returning warily to the sight of Peter, seated on the hard tiles and holding an unconscious Ray in one arm. “Are they dead?”

“Egon.” Venkman caught his breath, self-consciously swiping at his blood-smeared mouth

with his sleeve, staring at the physicist with a mixture of misery and acute shame. "I-I didn't know you were.... Egon, I—"

Spengler's suspicion decreased at those stumbling words. Uttering a soft groan, he dropped to his knees and encircled the crouched psychologist with both arms, the hug brief and hard. "We're going to help you, Peter," he said bracingly but with a hint of tears in his voice. "Don't be afraid."

Peter's breath caught in a sob. "*They* won't let you help me. They're getting stronger. They'll make me kill you all." His voice changed, losing all humanity. "Kill you all!" he threatened before dissolving into another sob.

Egon recoiled from that hate-filled croak, then neared the man again, laying one long-fingered hand against his neck and squeezing. "No, you won't," he returned softly, trailing his fingers over the rising bruise on Peter's jaw. He glanced down at the unconscious Stantz and the sluggishly seeping neck wound. "Let's take care of Ray, then we'll handle the entity."

A low moan drew his attention from Stantz to the far corner of the room where Winston was painfully raising his head. Dully, the black Ghostbuster propped himself on one elbow, rubbing the back of his head with the other hand. "Wha' hit me?" he wondered aloud, finally clarifying on the tableau by the window. "Oh, my...."

Peter sobbed again, then caught himself, visibly forcing himself away from impending hysteria to meet Winston's eyes. "I-I'm sorry, Winston. Didn't mean to hurt you." He glanced down. "I didn't take much this time," he quavered, lifting Ray a little higher in his arm. "I didn't kill him...no thanks to me....He-he's afraid of me."

Egon listened to this disjointed explanation with a worried frown, touching Ray's cheek gently. "He hasn't lost too much blood yet; looks like you missed the jugular. Why is he unconscious already?"

"T-trance to keep...him quiet." Peter swiped at his eyes again, then came to his feet, sweeping Ray up with him. The motion was so effortless that Egon raised one brow. "My system is enhanced in some way," he explained, crossing to the bed and depositing Ray on top of the sheets. "Muscles, dental work...." He parted his lips, embarrassedly offering the physicist a view of the elongated canines. "...some...some psionics." He laid one hand on Ray's hair, using the other to wipe his own face, a pained spasm crossing his drawn features. "They...the Q'utah...don't want me to tell you...but...I can hold on for awhile yet."

Egon pressed the call button for a nurse, then knelt by Winston and tilted his head up. "Are you all right?"

The black man shook his head groggily, while carefully probing a lump on the back of his head. "Dizzy," he muttered, allowing Spengler to help him to a chair in the corner. "Can't seem to concentrate."

Spengler patted one powerful shoulder. "Possible concussion. Remain here until a doctor looks you over." At Winston's half-nod, he crossed back to the bed, where Peter stood looking down at Ray's pale face. The youngest Ghostbuster was beginning to come around slowly, brown lashes fluttering.

Peter gulped when the dulled eyes sharpened, focussing on him as a matter of course. "How...are you feeling, kid?" he asked trepidatiously.

Ray blinked once, his eyes going wide with fear. Clapping a hand to his neck, he struggled to the opposite side of the bed, a cry of alarm escaping his lips. "No!"

Peter recoiled as if he'd been slapped even as Egon reached the young man. "It's all right, Raymond," the blond reassured, forcibly laying Stantz back down. "You're safe."

Ray fought him, batting away the restraining hands with desperation. "Peter—!"

"Peter won't hurt you." That calm, deep bass had the desired effect. Ray relaxed, large eyes darting fearfully from the blond to Venkman, who had retreated to the far corner.

The door opened then and a nurse entered, gaping upon catching sight of the reopened wound on Ray, and Winston's gray face. "What happened here?" she gasped, gaining the bed and taking in Stantz's condition in one experienced sweep.

"He's not bleeding too badly," Spengler replied, ignoring the question. "But you'd better get a doctor. And one for Winston—we think he might have a concussion."

She glanced in Zeddemore's direction, then Peter's, her nostrils flaring at the pungent sewer smells that permeated the room. Asking no further questions, however, she headed back for the hallway, and the public address system.

Egon waited until she'd gone, then patted Ray soothingly. "Don't be afraid, Raymond. You're going to be fine." Stantz said nothing, nor did he remove his gaze from Peter's turned back. Egon sighed and patted him again, then left the bed to join the psychologist in his corner. "He'll be fine, Peter," he repeated the encouragement, resting both hands on Peter's slumped shoulders. "You didn't do much damage." He turned Peter firmly, replacing his hands to hold the psychologist in place. "Don't reproach yourself."

"Don't reproach myself?" Peter repeated incredulously. "I nearly kill Ray and Winston and you tell me not to reproach myself?" Ruby again gleamed in the green eyes as his gaze fell upon Egon's adam's apple, visible over the top of the blue uniform. "It could have been you. It will *be* you next."

But this time Egon did not withdraw from the threat. Rather, he trustingly pulled Peter close, wrapping him in both arms. "It's not your fault, my friend."

Peter resisted for a single moment, then collapsed against the taller physicist, hanging on for all he was worth. "I can't help it!" he blurted, tears again beginning to fall. "I can't help what they're making me do!"

Egon ran a hand down Peter's back, grimacing slightly as Peter's amplified musculature took away his breath. "It's the Q'utah that are forcing your body to attack us," he said, not pulling away. "No one blames you."

Peter rested his head on Spengler's shoulder as though it were too heavy for him to hold it up. "Ray does." Moving only his eyes, he glanced over at the huddled engineer, who had not ceased watching him alarmedly. "Look at him."

Two doctors burst through the door, ignored Peter and Egon, and traversed the room to Ray and Winston. Egon moved himself and Peter out of their way without loosening his hold on Peter one iota. "Ray's not thinking clearly yet," he said when they'd reached a new position by the window. "When he's able, he'll understand it was the Q'utah's doing. They're the enemy, not you."

"They're the enemy," Peter parroted hopefully, adding almost inconsequentially, "It's nearly dawn." He buried his head in Egon's shoulder. "Get Ray out of here—out of town! So long as he's alive I can't take anyone else—I have to come back to him until he's dead." He snagged two fistfuls of blue coverall, twisting them desperately. "Don't let him get hurt again, Egon. Kill me if you have to."

Egon gave him another squeeze, then stepped back, facing the pleading eyes directly. "You know I won't let anything happen to Ray."

Peter sighed and bowed his head, immensely relieved. "If he's all right I...don't feel too bad. Besides, if I can't take anyone else, I think...maybe I'll...die soon."

Egon swallowed loudly, giving the psychologist a little shake. "That's not going to happen, either, Peter. And Ray is not going to leave town. We're going to go back to the firehouse as soon as he is released this afternoon."

That won a startled gape. "You don't understand! I *have* to come back for him until he's dead! There's no choice."

Egon essayed a small smile. "Trust me, Peter."

Peter stared back, then slowly nodded. "I...do trust you." He swallowed and returned to the window. "I have to go." He took one look at the five story drop and rickety drainpipe he'd been clinging to and shook his head. "Elevator," he decided, heading back to the door. "Can't turn into a bat. Bummer." He took a last look at Ray, then Winston, both of whom were now surrounded by a small medical team. "Tell them I'm sorry."

"Tell them yourself," Egon shot back with a stout nod, "tomorrow night."

* * *

The day which followed was nearly a carbon copy of the first. Peter returned to his sewer world, safe from the ravages of the sun. He crawled into a small cul-de-sac not far from the firehouse and collapsed there, depleted in body and exhausted in spirit. He dozed fitfully, sleep interrupted by disturbing dreams in which he killed his friends repeatedly and in the most macabre ways possible. He would start awake, tears on his face, only to hear the dry laughter of the Q'utah enjoying his torment. They hungered still; Peter's truncated feeding had been enough to sustain but not satisfy, and for this they blamed Peter, taking out their discontent by invoking disturbing visions and wave after wave of physical pain.

Gone was any claim to his own actions; whatever defiance he'd been able to show previously was now reduced to impotent protests the Q'utah barely recognized. This was demonstrated early after the return underground. Infuriated by Ray's survival, the Q'utah had forced Peter to repeatedly dunk his own head under the waste-charged waters, then to humiliate himself in ways that would have broken a lesser man. The lessons were effective and Peter Venkman's spirits sank lower, more so as he sensed portions of his personality begin to submerge beneath the encroaching evil that was the Q'utah.

The aliens might have already won completely—*would* have won—had their victim been any other. But Peter carried a shield comprised of hatred and bonded by all-consuming rage. Anger had always been Peter's strength, and anger he now nourished, using it to fuel the burning pit that had once been his heart. He was not theirs yet. Not *yet*.

Despite the misery, there was some measure of comfort to be found. Ray still lived. The morning before, Peter had not been sure. Pleasure at his friend's survival was tainted but not destroyed by the remembrance of his last empathic contact with the younger man. The fear spice had been strong—stronger than either love or trust in all but the memories. Not that the mind

touch had not been wonderful! Peter smiled, re-savoring the experience. Rather than childhood, last night Peter had re-lived some of their...of *Ray's* experiences at Columbia, many of them long forgotten or never known, and from a point of view refreshing by an innocence Peter had lost long ago. As before, Peter dwelled on the psychological intimacy they'd experienced, allowing it to ease some of the constrictions around his heart.

It would have been nice, Peter thought regretfully, *if Ray hadn't been so afraid*. The terror had been stimulating during the delirium of the feed; the memory was a stabbing ache. The affectionate trust Peter had once cherished was still there, and for that Peter was glad. But this time, as strong as the love had been, there was something Peter had only sampled the first time: an overpowering fear that bordered on the very fringe of hysteria. Peter's protective instincts rebelled at allowing his Ray to suffer like that, even while his heart broke to realize that he himself was the cause. Ray was afraid of him—more afraid than he'd ever been. The Q'utah had seen to that, stimulating the emotion for their own pleasure. Even were the Q'utah to be destroyed and Peter restored, would his relationship with Ray ever be the same? Not that the chances of Ray actually surviving their inevitable next encounter weren't admittedly slim.

The second beam of symbolic sunlight was that Egon was now aware of the situation. As ashamed as Peter had been to have the blond physicist see him at the hospital, just that much had he been he comforted. Egon had said to trust him and Peter did, more than he'd ever trusted anyone in his life. But could even the imposing Egon Spengler defeat an enemy a millennium old...and could Peter survive the battle? As a murderer of old men and young friends, did he even *want* to?

Peter shook himself out of that thought. Of *course* he wanted to survive; whatever had happened these past two days could be faced and worked out...eventually. Maybe. He hoped. Right now all he chose to concentrate on was revenge...defeating the Q'utah and exacting payment for what they'd made him do to Ray...for what they had done to Peter. Absently, he flexed his right arm, watching the muscle bulge at the biceps, though no more than it had done last week; less, in fact, since dehydration and lack of food were beginning to take a toll. Still he felt the strange energy coursing through his system, enhancing his strength and speed, keeping him moving when he should have long ago collapsed. How could he be so weak and yet so strong all at once?

Confused, he clapped both hands to his forehead, bowing forward. "Egon," he groaned aloud. "Egon, please...."

"We will force you to kill your precious Egon," a hated voice trilled, *"and we will feed on his thoughts."*

"You will pay for the blood oath," another harped, rattling Peter's nerves with a jolt of pain. *"Kill the boy, kill the other. Your friends all die."*

"They'll defeat you," Peter shot back in a now-rare burst of contempt. "Egon...."

"Egon is already dead," the first returned snidely. *"You are already dead."*

Whatever reply Peter would have made—could he have formulated a suitable one to that ominous remark—was lost in the last entity's announcement.

"Night."

Peter's empathics shifted into high gear—more intensely than he'd ever felt them save when feeding. A vision of Ray slammed into his mind, proximity strengthening the vision even more. He sensed rather than saw the young man very clearly, felt him shiver with dampness and

fear, and knew beyond knowledge that Ray was seated in the basement of the firehouse.

"So close."

"No," Peter whispered, again covering his face. "They can't be ready yet. Please, no more." The answer to this heartfelt plea was for his body to unfold from its uncomfortable crouch and scurry along the narrow passage to the nearest ladder. He emerged into the cool night air, tears on his face and gloom in his heart.

Dragging steps covered the one city block to Mott Street in short order. He pressed himself flat against the building opposite the great brick structure that he'd called home for several years, examining it with longing and dread. Home. This was his home and he wanted nothing so much as to crawl inside its secure walls, slip between clean sheets—barring Slimer's nocturnal visitations—and give himself over to the exhaustion that was claiming his soul, if not his body.

No lights shone in the lower windows as Peter crossed the street, resigned now to whatever fate awaited him inside. He sensed Ray even stronger now; the younger man had not changed position; the basement was still Peter's goal. He could only hope that there were adequate protections for his friend, even if it meant the end of Peter's existence...and the Q'utah's.

As expected, the outer door was locked. This proved to be no barrier to one whose strength was enhanced many times over. A slight exertion snapped the lock, allowing Peter access to the dim interior of the garage area. There his night vision proved to be another boon—he could see as well as if it were day. *Not that I really want to see what happens next*, he told himself gloomily. *Egon! Where are you?*

Dragging steps carried him to the stairway leading down to the basement/sub-basement combination. Down there, he knew, huddled twenty-five feet below, Ray Stantz waited. Even from here, the smell of Ray's...fear? anxiety?...was intoxicating. Subliminal warnings made him pause outside the metal firedoor, peeking around it rather than entering boldly. There were four life forms below. Not that that was surprising; Egon, Winston and Slimer would not have left Ray to face him alone.

"Four below," the parasite Q'utah growled, as empathically aware through Peter's senses as was Peter himself. *"Four, not one. Three and a not-human."*

From where he stood, Peter could see Ray quite clearly despite the dimness of the basement area. The engineer sat on a high stool three-quarters of the way across the floor, facing the stairway down which Peter peered. White bandages shone in the light of the single overhead bulb, and Ray raised a hand to touch the dressing guardedly. Though dressed warmly in jeans and red flannel shirt, he shivered slightly in the damp. *Afraid*, Peter thought sadly. *Ray doesn't trust me anymore.* There was none of the panic of the previous night, however, and the fear was tightly reined. Peter felt an element of pride in that fact; whatever else might be said about him, Ray Stantz's courage was deep cored and genuine.

Senses expanded even as this appreciative thought filled his heart, and Peter was able to identify the hidden forms. Winston's familiar essence was flattened against the containment unit, grim determination radiating as a purple-salty aura. At his side hovered Slimer, excited and chattery though silent. To Peter's right, he sensed Egon Spengler, crouched behind a work bench, emotions so coolly controlled as to barely register, yet unmistakable. From him Peter discerned high concern outwardly directed, and resolute competence. Suddenly, Peter felt better than he had in two days.

The Q'utah made no move and Peter felt scorn rise with a fledgling confidence. "What's the matter?" he taunted in a low voice, his heart beating like a triphammer. "Are you afraid they might be able to stop you?"

Their answer came in the form of another burst of pain, so excruciating as to nearly-knock Peter to his knees. "*Afraid of nothing!*" the entity shrilled silently. "*A millennium men have tried to stop us.*"

"Not to mention," Peter growled back, regaining his balance, "that the only other option is starvation in short order. Trap or not, you don't have any choice, boobies."

"*We will feed upon four this night.*"

"Hope you choke," Peter snapped, his feet descending the steep stair of their own volition. Craving grew, the deep seated hunger flaring like a new sun. Ray looked up as he approached, the expression in his large eyes enough to deepen the ache. "I'd hoped you were going to leave town, kiddo," Peter said, afraid himself.

Ray caught his breath, gaze riveted on Peter's gleaming canines. "Whatever happens, Peter," he managed, breathless but unpanicked, "I don't blame you."

That brought the psychologist to a brief stop. "I love you, too, Ray," he whispered, the warmth in Ray's mind flooding him unexpectedly. "And I'm sorry." Louder, "Know you're here, guys. Hard to hide from an empath."

Neither Winston nor Egon responded to his hale, though Ray's eyes darted in both directions as though seeking them out. Peter shook his head even as the Q'utah urged him to advance. Ray staggered to his feet but did not retreat as expected. Instead, he merely crossed his arms across his chest in a defensive gesture and held his stance. "You *had* to come back to me, Peter," he said with a defiance directed at Peter's captors. "They must be pretty hungry by now."

"We are ravenous," Peter replied, mentally berating himself for the 'we.' It was true—he was as hungry as the Q'utah and for the same sustenance. *Could the feed be an addiction?* But this was *Ray*! Collecting himself, Peter took a step backward. "No! Ray, I.... I'm not going to hurt you!"

"*You will feed!*" the Q'utah ordered, battling for control of Peter's body. Venkman clamped his mind in a knot, focussing on love, compassion, friendship. "N-no...."

"Peter."

That soft voice drew Venkman back around to his prey. Ray's amber eyes gleamed softly in the light, affection there mixed with suppressed fear. "You have no choice, Peter," he declared, taking a single step forward. "You *have* to take my... Me."

"They can't stop us," Peter blurted, wondering when the Q'utah-Venkman combination had become 'us.' "Egon...Winston...I'll just kill them if they try." Another iron effort forced his steps backward again toward the stair. "No matter what happens..." He swallowed. "...I don't want *you* hurt again."

Ray licked his lips, though moving no closer. "You don't have a choice, Peter. Look!" In an abrupt move, he ripped off the white bandages swathing his throat. Peter could see the red, swollen flesh held together by dark sutures. Something inside of him felt sick, then even that was submerged when the Q'utah went mad! Hunger fanned to unbearable heights, blocking out love and protectiveness; Peter saw only prey. Unable to stop himself, he abandoned his arduous flight, gathered his legs under him and *leaped* for the stationary younger man. He made it. The Q'utah did not.

There was no warning. The first hint of a trap came with the blinding curtain that cascaded up from the floor to form a barrier between himself and Ray. In mid-air and unable to change direction, Peter had time only to raise an arm to protect his eyes and then he was engulfed in flame. Molten lava dripped from every nerve, synapses seemed to short-circuit all at once. It felt as though he hung suspended for hours though the light impeded his forward speed not at all. The scream was torn from Peter's lips even as something was torn from his mind, the pain so intense that he barely registered crashing into Ray's chest. They both flew several feet and went down, landing hard on the concrete floor.

Only marginally conscious, Peter could see little of his surroundings, yet even through his growing haze, another sunburst, this time from the direction of the containment unit. He felt the unpleasant suction of directed energy even as arms wrapped around his middle, preventing him from being dragged along. Unearthly screams filled the room, uttered in three separate voices, all of them recognizable and abhorred. Sixty seconds later, the glare was gone, the room silent and Peter Venkman's mind was his own.

Sheer relief must have blacked him out for a few seconds, for the next thing Peter was aware of was that he was lying on top of something somewhat softer than the concrete floor, still held tight around the middle. Thundering feet approached, hands touching him gently on the back and head.

"Peter?" Egon's deep bass inquired, more anxiety in the tones than had been apparent in Peter's brief empathic scan. "Peter, speak to me."

"Is he all right?" Winston demanded from some point directly overhead. "What about Ray?"

"Peeee-ter!" That was Slimer's high falsetto, even as something squishy kissed his cheek. Peter sighed in pure contentment, exhaustion precluding his moving for a moment. *I'm free! I'm free! I'm... Hey! What about Ray?* Alarmed, Peter forced his head up until he could see his 'cushion.' A pair of worried eyes stared back from a distance of six inches, dark against a pale face.

"P-Peter?" Ray whispered. Emotions Peter declined to identify crossed the youthful face, even as the arms holding him in place tightened briefly before dropping away. "I-is that really you?"

"Ray?" Venkman croaked back. He propped himself up onto one elbow and rolled off the man he was still lying on. The effort was horrendous and nearly cost him his thready consciousness, but he held on tenaciously, worry coercing his vision back into focus. "Are you...?"

"Are *you*?" Ray shot back, weakly lifting one hand and touching the ugly stitches on his neck. His eyes never left Peter's, and there was a wariness there that returned the bile to the psychologist's mouth.

Peter managed a nod even as strong arms slid around him from behind and turned him over. Egon Spengler lifted him to a sitting position, bracing him with an arm around his back. Peter reluctantly raised his head, loathe to see the condemnation and disgust he expected to find in Spengler's eyes. To his surprise, he found only concern in the sapphire depths. Even as Peter watched, the concern softened into intense relief. "It *is* you, isn't it, Peter?" Was that a hint of tears in the resonant bass?

Peter sank backwards, Egon's arms providing a support that would have left him flat if it had been removed. His mind swirled, everything going light, dark and blank by turns. "Is it?" he

mumbled, taking rapid mental stock of himself. The background pressure and voices that had been part of every waking or sleeping moment for the past two days were gone, the relief so intense as to leave Peter shaking. "They're...gone," he managed through lax lips. "The Q'utah. They're...."

"Gone, Peter," Egon confirmed, using his other hand to cradle Peter's head. "We activated the emergency lock in the containment unit the minute you were clear. Activating it siphoned the Q'utah directly into the energy grid."

"Siphoned how?" Peter wondered, only mildly curious. If Egon said they were siphoned, that was good enough for him!

Winston answered from the left. "That info you came through with paid off, homeboy. Ray remembered what you said about the Q'utah being N-Es, so we planned our strategy accordingly. Egon set a barrier field of protonic energy attuned to let only your psionic frequency pass. As you went through, it filtered out any strange wavelengths as neat as putting you through a colander."

Peter grinned, having to force his eyes back open even as the quiet blackness beckoned. As his lashes lifted, he was treated to a view of Egon's blue uniform with one eye and the still supine Ray Stantz with the other. He tilted his head slightly, watching as Winston slid an arm under the younger man's shoulders and lifted, bracing Stantz much as Egon was him.

"Is it really him?" Ray blurted shakily, continuing to watch Peter as though the psychologist were going to spring at any minute. "Peter, is it really you?"

"Course it is, you dope," Peter returned, striving for a light tone. The quaver in his voice gave him away, and he struggled to sit on his own, feeling lost and vulnerable. Egon refused to release him completely, however, and for that Peter was grateful. "Ray...I'm...."

The youngest Ghostbuster didn't reply, though his focus shifted to Peter's mouth. It was only then that Peter realized that the inch long razor canines were still there. Appalled, he tapped one of them with a fingernail, questioning Spengler with a look while wondering if his eyes were at least green again.

One long forefinger pried open Peter's mouth, tapping a fang in turn. "Obviously, not all the modifications done to your body were psionic enhancements. Whether these physical alterations are permanent or not..." The blond head shook apologetically.

The answer to that came precisely on cue. Peter coughed and spat, ejecting two white objects from his mouth. Slimer zipped to ground level, extending one sticky hand before they hit. An odd look on his face, he held them up for public view. "What?" he asked, floating at shoulder level.

Peter ran his tongue along the dual holes in his gums. "My \$900 caps!" he wailed, clamping his mouth shut and feeling like one of the Beverly Hillbillies.

Egon gave a short bark of laughter at his discomfiture, as much a release of tension as humor. "We'll replace your winning smile tomorrow," he soothed, slinging an arm around Peter's chest and urging him up. "I'm betting you'll want to spend some time at the dinner table first. Those...uh...*were* root canals, weren't they? If not, we'll have to find you a straw."

After three days, food sounded pretty good, root canal or not. The body screamed its need even though Peter felt nauseated by the thought. He spat again, tasting the salt of human blood on his tongue, while his stomach tied itself into a knot. "A straw doesn't sound half bad," he joshed weakly, rubbing the still swollen spot on his jaw where Winston had punched him. The

black man looked sheepish.

"Um...about that shot, Pete..."

"About that concussion, Zed..." Peter returned, reading the man's mind. The two grinned and the matter was forgotten—as easy as that.

Winston turned and slapped Ray lightly on the chest. "Think you can make it up, kid? Don't want to spend the rest of the night here on the floor, do you?" Ray nodded and the two also staggered to their feet; the four stood there staring at each other for several long seconds, while the tension grew to an almost palpable force. Even Slimer felt it, and circled the quartet, dripping green slime in his wake. Peter shuffled his feet embarrassedly, not knowing what to say. Thanks seemed inadequate, 'I'm sorry,' even more so. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, darting a glance at Ray, who was leaning weakly against Winston. The young man was very pale and as weak as Peter himself. He widened his gaze to include Zeddemore, whose eyes gleamed with happiness. That combined with the warm weight of Egon's arm still around his back, was strengthening and reassuring, yet even that didn't loosen his tongue. For one of the few times in his life, Peter Venkman found himself bereft of one thing to say.

It was Slimer, surprisingly, who broke the uncomfortable tension by flaring his nostrils dramatically. "*Peeee-ew. Yucky! Yucky!*"

"Someone *is* backsliding with their personal hygiene," Egon agreed, freeing one arm and pinching his nose shut. "I may have to fumigate this coverall."

"Ripe is as ripe does, buddy-boy," Winston added, falling in with Egon's obvious attempt at lightening the situation. "You get a shower before dinner. And use lots of soap."

Peter lifted one arm to hear his grimy uniform crackle. "How about lots of Comet," he groaned, turning determinedly away from his armpit. "I need a good scrubbing." He paused, for there was still one member of the team undealt with. His green eyes rose, meeting Ray's brown ones and locking. "You must know I wouldn't hurt you for anything in this world—or any other."

Ray silently chewed his lip and Peter was again acutely aware of the holes in his gums where razor fangs had resided, the memory of what those fangs had done to his best friend living vividly on the film screen of his eyelids. His focus went from the torn flesh on Ray's throat, then up again to the white face and expressively inexpressive eyes that were examining him minutely, lingering on Peter's mouth. Finally, and to Peter's everlasting relief, Ray essayed an earnest smile. "I'm glad you're okay, Peter," he intoned solemnly. "We were worried."

In obvious and heartfelt agreement, Winston, Egon and Slimer engulfed him with hugs from all directions. Peter leaned into them with a blissful sigh, then noticed that Ray, despite his usually open affection, was maintaining his distance. Peter held his breath. "Tex?" he whispered, holding out a trembling hand.

Ray hesitated a moment longer, his gaze shifting from Peter's mouth to his eyes. Then the younger man threw himself forward, nearly knocking Peter over with the force of his lunge. "Welcome back, Peter," he murmured, hugging Peter ferociously around the neck. Peter closed his own arms around the younger man's chest and pulled him close, shut his eyes in absolute contentment and finally knew himself to be home.

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Thanks to the incursion of Gozer the Gozarian in the year 1985, the physical barriers defining the time-space locale known as New York City-present were somewhat less rigid than those governing most of the world. Damaged by the forcible breach, the walls of reality itself would occasionally thin, creating nexuses to other dimensions termed the nether-realms. When this happened, alien inhabitants of those far-away planes gained access to the great blue planet Earth, New York City in particular. While some few were powerful denizens in their own right, wielding energies unknown in this world, others were relatively harmless irritants driven by some unexplained desire to tease or vandalize. It was these latter which made up the bulk of cases the Ghostbusters handled day after day. This was one of them.

The building had been built in the 1930s as a vote-attracting nod at the hordes of low-income families in depression era New York. It had originally been a sound enough dwelling in a decent neighborhood, but time and neglect had served to erase all of that. The once proud structure consisted now of little more than a gutted shell, holed-through flooring and shaky stairs; in wartime it might have been mistaken for a direct bomb strike. Urban renewal, which had overtaken the neighborhood recently, had mandated this building be condemned and demolished; the six nether-beings who had moved in after the tenants were evicted decided otherwise. The Ghostbusters were there to settle the dispute—with blasters.

"He's over here! C'mon, guys!" Peter's call rang hollowly, muffled by crumbling walls. The shrillness of the purple N-E with three eyes and no legs sounded clearly, however, its taunts audible from all over the entire floor, "*Flesh-head*," and "*Earth-crawler*!" being among the more printable.

"I'll get you, you little slimeball!" Peter hollered, racing after the more-or-less round being at full speed. This vow was followed by a loud, "Whoop!" as his boots encountered the trail of purple slime the creature was leaving behind. His feet skidded out from under him, momentum carrying him forward several yards, bottom first. "Yeeeeeeow!" he screeched, coming to a stop just shy of a six-foot hole in the floor. Cautiously crawling the last few inches forward, he hitched one eye over the edge—it was a twelve foot drop to an equally saggy floor below. Peter gritted his teeth and backed away.

"*Can't catch meeee!*" the nether-being jeered, dripping additional slime on Peter's head for good measure.

Sputtering dangerously, Peter scooped goop out of his mouth, gagging at the fetor left behind. Three days in the sewers had left him with an intense hatred of unpleasant smells—particularly on himself. Wrinkling his nose, he retrieved the thrower dropped in his fall and thumbed the power up another notch. "You're toast, slimehead," he growled, taking careful aim. The emerging white-hot beam charred a crater in the ceiling, showering the furious psychologist with moldy plaster. The N-E, unfazed, swooped under the beam, zipped to the other side of the room and thumbed its nose in Peter's direction. Peter fumed, his admittedly unstable temper fraying like an old rag. "You little.... Ray?! Egon?! C'mon!" Peter yelled, again taking aim. "Get your butts in here!"

Pounding boots responded to this summons, the thud-thud preceding Ray Stantz's appearance by mere seconds. "I'm coming, Peter!" he hollered breathlessly, slipping on the same slime that had taken Peter down. He windmilled his arms, barely maintaining his balance, and ended up sliding gracefully into the room, looking pleased with himself. "Hey! That was fun!"

"We're not here for *fun*," Peter snapped, scowling fiercely in the other's direction. All he

wanted out of life right now was to go home and shower off this putrid gunk, and Ray was acting like a kid at an amusement park. "Do your job, Stantz."

Ray's budding grin faded as if it had never been. "Sorry," he returned humbly, eyes carefully fixed on the purple creature who was even now holding its sides with laughter. "I'll get him from this side."

Peter nodded curtly, glancing just once in his youngest partner's direction to gauge the angle for his next shot. To his alarm he noticed that Ray was standing perilously close to the large hole in the floor. Who knew how strong those boards were? Declining another shout, he crossed the distance in a double stride and raised his arm, intending to drag the younger man to safety by the scruff of the neck. "Watch i—"

Ray turned, seeing Peter a fraction before his collar could be touched. Brown eyes widened, flying from Peter's hand to his mouth, a panicked expression crossing the youthful features. Uttering a barely audible gasp, Ray stepped backward out of reach, his foot encountering nothing but empty air. With a surprised yelp, he toppled, landing on the floor below with a loud thump.

"Ray!" Momentarily startled into immobility, a dozen thoughts flew across Peter's mind, lighting briefly before moving on. The image of Ray's face when he'd seen Peter so close flashed briefly, driving a rusty dagger deep into Peter's chest. It was the sound of Ray hitting that galvanized him into action. He leaped forward, barely avoiding going over himself, and stared down at the sprawled body lying a dozen feet below, his throat constricting at the blood that was beginning to soak the dirty boards around Ray's head.

"Ray, are you all right?" There was no answer to his faltering query and now dread lent itself to Peter's distress. He crawled to the edge of the hole and reversed, scrambling for position until he was hanging onto the rotted boards by his fingertips. From there it was an easy drop to floor level. He knelt beside the still form, unbuckling the heavy proton pack and unzipping the sand-colored uniform. Eyes narrowed, he ran shaking fingers over chest and back, searching for broken bones. As near as he could tell, the head injury seemed to be the worst of it—potentially more than bad enough. He fished in his pocket for a handkerchief, using the soft cloth to wipe away some of the blood. To his relief he found only a shallow cut on Ray's forehead that was, as such cuts are wont to do, bleeding copiously.

"Ray, you in there?" Peter haled softly, slapping one smooth-shaven cheek firmly. Brown lashes fluttered and slowly rose; obviously, Ray had just had the wind knocked out of him. Torn between shaking the younger man until his teeth rattled and hugging him hard, Peter's temper struck out on its own and went into immediate overload.

"What is the matter with you?" he roared, gripping the groggy man by both arms and hauling him into a sitting position. "What'd you think I was going to do, *bite* you?" Nastily, he bared his teeth, revealing the silver temporary caps in the canine positions. Ray blinked confusedly up at him.

"I-I...sorry," he stammered, raising one hand and dabbing at the blood running down his cheek. "I.... What happened?"

Annoyingly, this innocent confusion fanned Peter's fury even hotter. "Really stupid," he snapped, giving in to his impulses and shaking Ray roughly. "The gooper escaped, thanks to you. We chase the thing twenty minutes and you have to do something moronic like...."

Ray uttered a low cry, clutching at his ribs and stammering more bewildered apologies. Peter pressed his lips together to prevent more rebuke from gushing forth and again felt inside the

open jumpsuit. "You may have a couple of ribs loose," he grated, teeth clenched. "You could have broken your neck."

Ray braced himself against Peter's bent leg, fixing his gaze on the dirty floor. "I'm sorry."

Disregarding the extended apology, Peter searched Ray's pockets, coming up with a small packet of Kleenex. "Here," he gritted, shoving two of the tissues into Ray's hand and taking the rest for himself. "Clean yourself up." Stantz dabbed at his bloody face while Peter pressed the rest of the wad against the cut, tangling the fingers of his other hand in the auburn hair to secure the hold. "Any double vision?" he rapped, using his grip to force Ray's head up. "Dizziness? Nausea?" He received Ray's protestations with an absent nod and leaned forward to study the brown eyes for himself, seeing nothing amiss. "I don't think you have a concussion. You weren't out very long."

"I'm fine," Stantz mumbled, working his fingers under Peter's and holding the tissues in place. He still wouldn't look up.

Venkman felt a particle of remorse at the harsh way he was treating his injured comrade. But Peter's temper was too shredded to allow the gentleness he usually showed to the sensitive younger man, and Ray's lack of trust in him hurt too much to bear. Without a word, he unceremoniously hauled Ray to his feet, then staggered when the engineer uttered another cry, his leg giving out under him.

Peter braced himself, drawing Ray's arm across his shoulders and slipping his own arm around the younger man's waist. "Ankle?" Stantz pale face made the ensuing nod almost unnecessary. Peter sighed. "Looks like we bust with one short for a while."

"I'm sorry," Ray repeated miserably, hanging his head. "I didn't mean it."

"Sure you didn't." Peter half-supported, half-carried the other toward the rickety stairway in the corner from which they could exit the building. He was starting to calm a bit, though resentment sang in each vein. The cause of the accident was all too clear to him—he'd seen Ray staring at his mouth, noticed the fear in the amber eyes—fear of Peter Venkman. Ray was still afraid of him and it hurt. Movement caught his attention peripherally and he looked up to see Egon and Winston peering down at them; Ray's yell must have brought them running.

"What happened?" Egon demanded, studying them both closely. "Raymond, are you hurt?"

Ray waved his free hand, eyes bright with shame. "I messed up, Egon. We lost the last gooper."

"Never mind that." Winston circled the hole, cautiously testing each board before he stepped on it. "Are *you* okay? Pete?"

"It's his ankle," Venkman returned, irritated by so obvious a question. "Get down here and we'll get him to a hospital."

"Very—" Egon stopped abruptly and stepped back out of Peter's view. There was a scrambling sound and muted instructions, then the magnificent glow of two proton streams illuminated the entire open floor. Peter recognized the shrill whistle as belonging to the purple gooper, then he was blinking, trying to adjust to the sudden dimness.

Winston's exultant yell of, "Got him!" told Peter that those two at least had had more success than he and Ray. Supporting Ray's weight, Peter silently made his way to the stairwell and waited for the triumphant twosome. He felt a timid touch on his chest and looked down into the contrite face of his friend.

"I'm sorry," Ray said, letting his hand fall away at Peter's sharp look. "I didn't mean to mess up the bust."

"For someone who didn't mean to, you did a great job," Peter snapped back, unable to help himself. He immediately regretted the words upon seeing the fresh guilt flash in those soft brown eyes. No apology would pass, however, so it was a real relief when Egon and Winston showed up then, Egon combing purple slime out of his hair, Winston grinning and bearing a smoking trap.

"We got it!" Zeddemore announced, holding the trap aloft. "It dive bombed Egon and ran right into my stream!"

"Odoriferous creature, isn't it?" Egon remarked, wrinkling his long nose. "I believe I shall claim the first shower when we get back."

"You may have to fight me for it," Winston remarked heartily, playfully tossing a blob in Peter's direction. When Peter's sour expression turned into a scowl, he darted a worried glance at Stantz. "Hey, you guys really *aren't* okay, are you? How bad is it?"

"I'm fine," Ray said even as Egon knelt to carefully probe the rapidly swelling ankle. Ray stiffened at the first touch, and Peter could see the blood drain completely from his already pale face. Ray darted a self-conscious glance in his direction, bit his lip and looked away, and Peter felt his own heart sink.

"Look," Peter began, his jaw tightening, "why don't you guys take Ray to the hospital for some x-rays while I stuff these goopers into containment." He barely stopped himself from reacting to puzzlement from Egon and Winston and the way Ray's shoulders sagged. He didn't care. It had suddenly become imperative that he have some time to himself. Time with *no* Ghostbusters around.

This plan was spoiled when Winston shot him a cryptic look and proclaimed, "Think I'll head back with you, Pete. You can't carry five traps by yourself."

Accepting the arrangement and not remarking on Peter's grimace, Egon stepped forward and slid an arm around Ray's chest, allowing Peter to withdraw. *Good ol' Egon. Knew I could count on you, anyway.* "We'll drive Ecto-1 to the hospital while you two request transportation from the officers working crowd control. We'll join you at home shortly."

"I didn't mean to do it, Egon," Ray said, leaning heavily against the blond.

"I've never considered self-impairment to be one of your hobbies, Raymond," Egon teased gently in a way Peter would have under other circumstances. He was glad to see Ray relax fractionally as the friendly tone soothed some of the guilt Peter's accusations had inflicted. *But not enough, Spengs,* Peter thought with regret as Ray's shoulders continued to sag. *You don't have the touch with him.*

The problem was, maybe he didn't, either. Not anymore.

* * *

Winston had assisted in flushing the traps into permanent containment, then disappeared upstairs, much to Venkman's relief. Emotions churned inside Peter's gut, from frustration to outrage to a gentle sorrow closely resembling grief, each more difficult to deal with than the last.

Not that these feelings were new; they'd been planted by the Q'utah, germinating in a soil tilled by heartache and watered by regret. Guilt had settled heavily, bearing as its standard the white flag of gauze swaddling Ray Stantz's damaged throat. Though logic dictated that blame be laid at the insubstantial feet of the Q'utah, still Peter accepted a lion's share for himself, as well; he had failed to protect Ray when his friend and brother had needed him most, worse, had become the instrument of near fatality. That Ray had survived was fortuitous and, Peter admitted freely, no thanks to himself; that he had immediately declared his forgiveness of Peter characteristic. Both were welcome—had Ray died by Peter's own hand, so, too, would the psychologist, in spirit if not body. Yet, even that provided no oils on the maelstrom that raged inside of Peter's own soul.

Ray doesn't trust me anymore.

Frustration was the worst. Peter paced the garage like a caged panther, from the steel security door Winston had installed after the one time they had been burglarized, back past their secretary, Janine's, desk and into his own office, around and around in a monotonous circuit. Despite determined efforts, his mind insisted on replaying the events of the past week, emotions rising like old bile in the back of his throat. The storm was confused and undirected but foremost in his soul was the alluring desire to retaliate. But what kind of vengeance can one wreck upon a bodiless entity that was even now entrapped in the energy matrices constituting the klein bottles? *Can't touch them*, he reminded himself bitterly. *Over a thousand years of death and torture, and they get off this easy.*

"It's not fair!" He punctuated the statement with a vicious kick at the nearest file cabinet, following up with a right cross that would have knocked any sensible human cold. The steel drawer *whumpf*ed and deformed inward, the green exterior lightly stained with red. Peter grimaced, blowing on his multiply skinned knuckles, and feeling not one whit better. The cold, hard fact was that his natural inclination to turn blame outward wasn't working this time. The Q'utah were very much beyond Peter's reach, and no amount of temper tantrums could change that. He wanted to make them pay and pay dearly for what they'd done to him—what they'd made him do to Ray...to them both.

The only other tangible target for his continued pain was an auburn-haired, fresh-faced young man who had once loved Peter with all his heart. This was Ray's fault, too. After all, if Ray hadn't made that offer, Peter wouldn't even now cringe in remembrance every time they were together. If Ray had fled when he'd been given the chance, Peter would not now be crushed under a mountain of culpability. If Ray hadn't stopped believing in him, Peter would have been long rejuvenated by the supportive circle of his friends. If Ray hadn't stopped loving him.... Peter's heart twisted in his chest.

I nearly killed him. Again, as he did nearly every waking hour, he tasted the salty copper of Ray's blood, and impulsively spat as he had after his teeth had ripped through vulnerable flesh. Ray's body was warm in his arms, the taste of the fear-spice delicious, the feeling of power over a helpless human being sang its pleasure in Peter's veins...then died. Shame added its timbres to the song that was Peter's misery, that there could be anything smacking of pleasure in so vile an act.

But it wasn't all bad, he reminded himself for the thousandth time, striving as he had for days to find some semblance of balance in the situation. *Not all of it.* The empathics were gone, but Peter remembered what it had been like to absorb the memories and emotions of the dying man; he felt again that peculiar fusion with another human mind, and savored the intimacy. *I was actually part of him for a while*, Peter thought wonderingly.

The memories had begun to fade as soon as empathic contact had been severed, but fragments of the other's history remained with him, tantalizing shadow memories not his own. "So that's what 'Pa' Hanley was like," Peter murmured, a decade-long curiosity at least partially fulfilled. "Just like I imagined, the old sour puss. Reminds me of Old Man Petrewski from Flatbush. He had a face like a pickle, too." Melancholy filled him, as strong as a little boy's loneliness. "We were a lot alike growing up," he told a six-year old boy who wasn't there. "So empty." For a single moment, righteous indignation crowded away the resentment, and Peter again felt that deep-rooted protectiveness that had marked their relationship from the beginning. "I wish I'd known you then, Ray. No one would have *ever* touched you or put you down if I'd been there."

Tactile sensations flooded back at the trigger, from tired muscles to the thick leather strap cutting into young skin. Peter flinched from its sting and was rewarded with the smell of fresh-mown hay and the sloppy greeting of a pet cow named Lorna. "Lorna?" Peter snorted, amused despite himself. "Not quite as weird a pet as I'd expected, but knowing you, kiddo, there were a lot more where that came from."

Quite without bidding, Peter envisioned another scene—one from his own past, a wet tongue and soft fur. "Sparky," he breathed, wanting to smile and cry all at once. "Good old dog. Forgot all about you. Shouldn't talk about Lorna, I guess—pets are all the same no matter what they are."

The visuals were sketchy and fading further day by day; the second-hand emotions were more long-lasting. There had been so much loneliness in the younger man's past—so much grief—and the abandonment by his parents had been crushing. *Why does that sound familiar?* Peter asked himself bitterly, for the father he was missing was of medium height and balding, and considered the holidays 'sucker time' for the marks. *We have too much in common, Ray.*

But at least Charlie Venkman reappeared at irregular intervals to lavish love and attention on a son who needed him. Ray had never seen his parents again and never would. How could he bear remembering...? Except that Peter suspected Ray *didn't* allow himself to remember, even if he could. There had always been gaps in their conversation whenever talk had turned to the past. *Everyone blocks things out they don't want to remember*, the psychologist in him remarked silently. *Wonder how much I block out?*

But there were other sentiments Ray had to draw upon, pleasant ones, particularly those centering around Peter himself. These remained as clear and fresh as though first absorbed. Peter stopped mid-pace to lean against Janine's desk, overwhelmed by the two-way rush of affection he'd felt from the moment Ray had offered his own blood for Peter's survival. His faith in Peter had been so strong that even now it made Peter's eyes sting. *From the very beginning, he trusted me.*

"*The boy always was a fool,*" mocked him from every corner of the room.

"Only when it came to trusting me," he answered, his words lost in the stillness of the air. He shut his eyes against the self-accusation and another pattern arose, himself as Ray saw him, first in college: tall, strong-featured and intelligent, and with a heart Sir Launcelot might envy. *Even I wasn't that perfect*, he thought with a wry smile, automatically running fingers through his wavy hair. *You'd have thought that image would have tarnished a bit over the years.* But it hadn't. The reflections of himself from *That* night (Peter always thought of it as *That* night) also rang clear in his thoughts—too clear. Older, perhaps, more human than idol, but there had been

no shade of reservation despite Peter's lack of facade. Ray had always accepted him as he was without desire for change, unlike any other person who had ever entered Peter's life.

Teeth slashed through skin and trust died.

And now Ray is afraid of me.

The last reel unfolded across the viewing screen of his closed eyelids and Peter was again himself seeing Ray's face as it had appeared through the hospital window. Dread and outright fear had tamped affection nearly out of existence. He remembered Ray shivering on the bed as far away as he could get, large eyes fixed hysterically on Peter's mouth...as they had been today.

"Can't blame you too much, kid," Peter whispered, his stomach churning nauseatingly. "How can you believe in someone who gave in so easily—who didn't try hard enough to stop himself from killing you?" His fists clenched, generating a jagged edge of pain from his swollen knuckles that was somehow welcome and no less than he deserved. "Frankly, I think I'm afraid of me, too."

Even Winston and Egon seemed to watch Peter constantly, suspiciously, as though they expected him to snap out again at any minute. Indignation grew, radiating toward all three of his friends. Winston and Egon doubting him hurt as badly as the fact that Ray did. Ray generally stayed out of his way, but Winston watched him surreptitiously, whenever he thought Peter wasn't looking; Egon was more open about it, but with a hesitance in his blue eyes as though he wanted to speak but could not find the words. Even Slimer hovered constantly, always nearby, if without the usual devoted chatter that usually drove them all crazy. Peter slammed his already abused left fist down onto Janine's desk, barely noticing the fresh blood that spotted a stack of invoices. "I'm not a specimen!" he growled.

Absently, he fingered the bruise along his jaw where Winston's haymaker had landed three days earlier. It was mostly faded now, more yellowish than purple, and the swelling was long gone. "I'm surprised he didn't break my jaw," he murmured aloud.

"I tried."

Peter's head snapped up at that half-amused baritone, eyes narrowing as Winston Zeddemore descended the long staircase from the upper levels. "What are you doing here?" he demanded gruffly. "Spying on me?"

Heavy boots thumped on the concrete floor as the black man approached, coming to a stop behind Peter's right shoulder. "Is that what you think?"

Peter bit his lip, dropping his head to study the pile of bloodied paperwork. "I haven't decided to sprout fangs again," he managed over the lump of resentment choking him.

A warm, heavy hand settled on his shoulder, bringing Peter irrationally back to the evening a week distant when Ray had touched him much like Winston was. The empathic flood had been delightful then, but there was no flood now and no delight, nothing but that simple, tactile contact. Once it would have been enough, but Peter's hurts bore too deep now for even Winston's offered friendship to touch.

"I wasn't thinking you would," Zeddemore reproved mildly. "I was hoping you might like to talk." He pulled Peter around, dipping his head until Peter was forced to meet his eyes, to see the sympathy and understanding there. One of the many locks on Peter's heart snicked open, loosening his tongue enough to mumble,

"Nothing to talk about." He pulled back and away, rubbing his sore knuckles. "I'd better go...." Winston grabbed him again, arresting the intended escape; Peter's eyes flashed offense.

"Planning on hitting me again?" he snapped, bruised jaw jutting truculently forward; body tensed for combat.

Winston blinked and released him, raising both hands in a placating gesture. "I'm not here to fight, Pete. I'm here because—"

"Why?" Peter demanded, not unclenching his fists.

The older man hesitated. "I thought you could use a friend."

The answer disarmed Peter immediately. He gulped, the anger fleeing in a rush. "Why?" repeated, this time with more perplexity than heat.

"Because I *am* your friend." The Negro wrapped a long arm around Peter's shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug and ignoring Peter's half-hearted attempts at retreat. "You've been sending mixed signals for days, Pete, and I think it's time you talked instead of running."

Running? That was a surprise. Peter Venkman was a social creature, adept at absorbing what emotional support he needed from those around him. Rather than rejecting his friends' approaches, he would seek them out, and they would offer whatever he needed, whether it be a hearing ear, a comforting shoulder or just the consolation of companionship. When there was consolation to be had, that is.

"What do you mean?" he asked stupidly, finding no strength to pull away from the other's tight hold.

He felt Winston examine him thoughtfully, and Peter stove not to squirm under his sharp look. "Ever since that problem with the Q'utah, you've stuck up 'no trespassing' signs all over. Look at you now, hiding down here instead of upstairs with me or at the hospital with Ray and Egon. That's not like you. Ray's hurt and you're here?" He cluck-clucked disbelievingly. "No way, Jose. Last time Ray was injured on a bust, you were stuck to that boy's side like superglue. We had to use a crowbar to get you to eat and sleep."

Peter shook his head sadly. "That concussion he had in June wasn't my fault."

The answer seemed to surprise Winston as much as it did Peter, who hadn't intended to say anything at all. "What are you talking about, homeboy?"

Venkman took a deep breath and again turned away, his shoulders hunched. He didn't want to see Winston's face when the man realized the full extent of Peter's culpability. "Ray was standing on the edge of that hole—too close. I was going to drag him back. He turned, saw me and jerked away." He darted a glance up, then immediately away. "Don't you see? He fell because he was more afraid of me than he was of breaking his neck!"

Winston stared and Peter could hear his breathing increase its pace. "That can't be right. Ray's never been afraid of you in his life. Ray loves you like a brother, man."

Well...he did, anyway. Peter directed his gaze at the top of Janine's untidy desk, finding the unaccusing metal top soothing, somehow. Inside, the pangs of loss and isolation grew exponentially deeper the closer they got to the crux of the problem. "I imagine it's a little hard to love a brother who's just ripped your throat out. He must wonder if it's going to happen again—whether I'll ever revert to type. He must know that I...remember."

"Remember what, Pete?" Winston asked gently, replacing a hand on Peter's shoulder.

"Him." Peter picked up a stapler from the desk, turning it over and over in his hands. It was heavy and cold and made Peter think of the pit of his own stomach. "What it was like. For me, it was pleasure with no logic involved; imagine being ravenously hungry and then being offered a full banquet table. I had no control—none! Even when he was begging me...." A sob

rose and he took a deep breath, striving to control his shaking voice. The memory of Ray's pleading was distant, but the intensity of his terror as he lay dying in Peter's arms was sharp as a diamond. "He was begging me not to kill him...and I enjoyed it."

"Peter." The name was whispered softly, then Winston's arm was back across his shoulders and Peter gratefully accepted the comfort he could not deserve. "It wasn't you enjoying it, man, it was them—the Q'utah. You were as much a victim as Ray was. Why can't you see that?" Peter felt the muscular body straighten, tightening his hold. "I know you, Pete, and I know for a fact there isn't any way in the world you would ever hurt Ray—or let anyone else hurt him, either. I've seen you go to bat for that boy too often—and him for you—to believe you'd *enjoy* seeing him actually die."

"Maybe...." The words made sense and echoed what Peter had been telling himself for days. The only problem was that he couldn't accept them, the risks were too great. "Too bad Ray doesn't believe it."

"You can't say that, Pete," Winston protested, giving him a shake. "Ray loves you as much as you love him—that's so obvious it's almost funny you not believing that. If you'd seen how scared he was for you even *after* he ended up in the hospital, you wouldn't think that." He paused, continuing in a softer voice, "Egon and I were just as worried for you."

Peter continued to hold the stapler, then placed it down gently on the desk, his fingers cramping around it. "I saw how scared he was *of* me on the bust today. He looked at me and thought I was going to kill him." *Large eyes flying to his mouth where the hated fangs had once been...fear blanking the youthful face...Ray falling....* "He thought I was going to hurt him and he flinched away." He stiffened, shoulders coming back, head determinedly coming up. "If he doesn't trust me, there's no way we're going to be able to fight together."

"But...."

Peter raised a peremptory hand. "Don't say it, Zed. The way the three of you have been keeping your distance shows me you think so, too. Let's face it, in our business, trust is everything. If the kid is forced to work with someone he doesn't trust, it's going to get him killed, or you, or Egon. Today was proof of that. I'm not willing to risk that...not with him. Not with *any* of you."

Silence reigned for a long moment, then Winston, not releasing Peter's shoulders, led him over to Janine's chair and pushed him down. When Venkman made to rise, he leaned forward, using his superior weight to hold the psychologist in place. "I think it's about time you heard me out, Pete. There's a few of the supposedly obvious facts you seem to have missed."

"Like...?"

"Like the reason we've been keeping out of your way." Peter's skepticism must have shown on his face, for Winston shook him again, still not lifting his large hands. "Pete, you seem to be forgetting that the rest of us know what you went through with the Q'utah. Oh, not completely since we can only imagine, but we know you, and how hard it is for you to even come close to losing your identity. None of us have forgotten Watt. There's bound to be some trauma associated with that."

"You sound like me," Peter complained, a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. Maybe Winston had a point. Though he was having trouble objectively identifying the specifics, as a psychologist Peter had *expected* to face the results of living the better part of two and a half days under slow torture. What he hadn't expected was for the effects to gnaw away at him without

respite. *Had* he been subconsciously rebuffing his friends' advances since *That* night?

Winston smiled back. "I was quoting you. Not a bad deal learning from the best, eh?" His smile faded, leaving him looking older and very tired. "Point being that we knew how bad off you were and wanted to help, but you kept..." He waved one hand helplessly. "...running away from us. I wasn't kidding about those 'no trespassing' signs, Pete. You made it loud and clear that you didn't want to be bothered—always going off by yourself, snapping when one of us spoke to you. Your temper has been nonexistent and you're irritable all the time."

"I haven't been that bad. Have I?" Peter asked, surprised. He'd known he'd been a little short, but all that?

Winston nodded solemnly. "Worse. Even Egon was thrown for a loop. Finally, he told Ray and me to give you some breathing space. He said that when you were ready, you'd come to us." He paused significantly. "Looks like a bad call on this one. Your stubbornness even extends toward feeling rotten." Another pause. "We *wanted* to come to you, Pete, but you didn't want *us*."

Venkman ignored that last. *We wanted to come to you*. He tasted the phrase again, liking the sound. So he *hadn't* been abandoned by his friends, after all. Honesty told him that he *had* been short-tempered of late. He remembered Egon coming to him two nights before, ostensibly for advice but obviously with conversation in mind. Peter winced to remember the sharp words that had passed between them...from him, he amended, not Egon...and Egon's withdraw. There had been pain in the blue eyes then that Peter had not noticed until now. Before Egon, it had been Winston, bearing a plate of spaghetti like an shield, also rejected. Poor Ray had hovered silently for days unacknowledged, large brown eyes woeful. "I'm sorry," he blurted, wishing he could say as much to Egon and Ray and resolving to do so later. "I didn't know. I didn't mean to."

Winston's fingers massaged the tight muscles in Peter's shoulders, and Peter found himself relaxing despite himself. "We know that, homeboy. We don't blame you. We knew you were hurting; what hurt us was that we couldn't help. Let us help now."

Peter smiled gratefully up into the dark face. "Thanks. I'll...try." The offer was so tempting—so wanted—that Peter nearly forgot the carefully constructed reasoning behind his earlier decision and the emotion that had prompted it. That blissful state didn't last long. "None of this changes anything. I know what I saw today and I saw Ray nearly die because he was afraid of me." That hurt all over again and he slumped. "We're all of us alive *only* because we take care of each other in a fight. If Ray won't let me near him, he's going to get killed when things get tough."

"Besides which," Winston added cannily, "not being able to watch out for Ray would pretty much kill *you*, too."

Peter shrugged. Despite Winston's teasing, Peter had long ago come to accept that fact. He didn't disrespect Ray's abilities to handle himself; rather, he relied on them, for Ray's strength, speed and sheer determination had delivered Peter from the Reaper more times than he could count. But Ray's enthusiasm often got in the way of his common sense, his impulsiveness leading him to jump the gun in combat and to act before he thought. *Not that I don't do that myself*, Peter admitted wryly, *especially when I'm p.o.'d. Then it's Ray who keeps a leash on me!* On several levels, he'd felt protective of the young man since college and Peter saw no reason to change now. *Aren't friends supposed to watch out for each other?*

Aloud, he said, "No argument there, Zed. I don't like to see the kid hurt. Never have.

Doesn't have anything to do with the fact that we *all* watch out for each other out of necessity." He swallowed hard, forcing the hated words past clenched teeth. "That's why I'm pulling out for a while to...give everyone a chance to get back to normal. You can call that Army buddy of yours, Eddie Kobart, to fill in so you won't be short—"

He broke off; Winston's fingers had ceased their massage and were now digging painfully into his arms. "Don't you dare," he stated in cold tones, piercing Peter with a scowl. "We're not going to let you *run*, Venkman. I'm not about to let you do that to Egon or Ray...or yourself."

"I never run!" Peter snapped back, anger flaring again. Consciously, he tamped it down, remembering the admonition earlier. "I just think it might be the best thing for everyone involved."

Winston stared at him pityingly. "Putting your own feelings aside, can you sit there and tell me that either Ray or Egon—or I—will be better off without you around? Who drags Egon out to live a little whenever he starts thinking like a mushroom? Who keeps Ray from crushing down under the blame he keeps taking on? Or buoys me up when I'm down in the dumps? Have you the slightest idea how involved you are in all our lives?"

Peter opened his mouth to deny the words, then shut it again with a snap. Frankly, he *did* know and not only as a psychologist. While he admittedly had more than a few personal blind spots, the natural empathy he was blessed with gave him a pretty balanced view of the relationship the four of them shared, and a lack of false modesty allowed him to see the very integral part he himself played in the team, particularly with Egon and Ray. Without him, Egon would have long ago retreated into his fungus studies, becoming starchily stolid and so wrapped up in his scientific pursuits as to forget he had an actual life to lead.

It took very little effort for Peter to conjure up an image of Ray Stantz as he had been back in college. He closed his eyes and saw a boy whose self-image was so battered by childhood abuse and neglect that his sense of worth had been practically zero when he'd joined Egon's math class. It had taken conscious effort and support from Peter to coax that battered spirit into asserting itself; the present day Ray Stantz—positive and reasonably self-confident—was proof of the success of his efforts, though the kid was still prone toward accepting blame for things he had no control over. *Good thing the kid's buttons are so easy to push; makes it easy to divert that guilt before it hurts him too badly.* He stopped. Without Ray's trust, that function had officially come to an end.

Fighting the renewed ache, Peter looked up again into earnest chocolate brown eyes. Winston hadn't been with him as long as the others but he'd become family almost from the day he'd joined. The powerful black man might not have developed with them—for the other three had grown from boys into men together—but his warm, caring personality had provided a sound backing that the other three had lacked, and he'd brought the assets of a stable background and the experiences of open combat in Viet Nam to the team. More, of them all, Peter and Winston most closely shared a similar history, city street life neither Egon nor Ray could ever fathom. When Winston got out of sorts, affected by the unfairnesses of society, Peter could understand, and invariably knew just how to make him feel better and offer sympathy. The black man returned the favor by being there for Peter whenever the psychologist needed to talk...such as now. However, there was a more powerful motivator at work here, one Peter could not dismiss lightly.

"I know what you're saying," Peter pronounced carefully, "and I...appreciate it. But that doesn't have anything to do with what I'm talking about." He straightened, pushing Zeddemore's

hands gently aside and rising to face the man squarely. "We're talking about risking Ray's life in combat, and I think that puts what you're saying in a majorly different perspective."

Winston backpedaled, raising both hands palm up in a helpless gesture. "At least *talk* to Ray and Egon first, okay? Don't make a decision like this on your own."

Peter clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll talk to them, not that it's going to be easy." His lips turned downward of their own accord. "It's hard enough to look at the bandages on the kid's throat and remember what I did. It's harder to look into his eyes and know that *he's* remembering, too. But..."

"But you'll do it?" Winston asked with weak hope.

Peter nodded, sorry he was putting his friend through the same anguish he was feeling himself. "First chance I get."

"You're about to get that chance," Winston remarked, cocking his head in a listening attitude. "I hear Ecto coming."

* * *

The great double doors swung slowly inward, admitting the red-and-white Cadillac hearse to the garage area. It nestled into its roomy berth, the right front fender knocking over a plastic waste bin before coming to a stop. Egon Spengler climbed out from behind the steering wheel, responding to his partners' hoots with a friendly wave. "They rushed us right through," he called, circling the car to the passenger's side rear. "Andy Liebowitz was there visiting a patient, and he cut some of the red tape."

"Everything okay?" Winston left Peter's side and crossed to the car, knocking an empty oil can aside with a little kick. "How you doin', homebrew?"

This last was aimed at Ray, who was struggling to escape the back seat. His tan uniform was gone, though he still wore the black t-shirt and light slacks the Ghostbusters routinely used as undergarments. In deference to the chilly day, he'd knotted the sleeves of an old gray sweatshirt Peter kept in Ecto's back area around his shoulders; he pulled it off and tossed it on the seat, then swung his feet out of the car. His left foot was still clad in his work boot; heavy bandaging showed through the black sock he wore on his right. He shot the black man a rueful smile even as Egon pulled him up by the arms. "I'm fine. My ankle is sprained and Andy thinks I cracked a couple of ribs where I landed on my pack..." he bit his lip when Egon tugged too hard, relaxing a moment later, "...but I think they're just bruised. Nothing serious. Sorry if I was any trouble."

"Happens to the best of us, kiddo," Zeddemore returned, ruffling Ray's hair good-naturedly. "Happens to you just a little more often, is all. But then, you always did tend to get a bit over-enthusiastic on a bust."

Stantz shrugged self-deprecatingly, the action barely stirring Egon's powerful grip on his bare arm. "Clumsy, you mean. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"That's because you were too busy watching me." Venkman, too, left the reception area to approach the car, sweeping his youngest partner with a glance. Egon slung one of Ray's arms across his shoulders, his own around the other's chest and Peter frowned. He popped his head into the car, glanced around and emerged looking puzzled. "Didn't the hospital send along any

crutches?"

Ray pressed his hand against his ribcage and Egon hurriedly repositioned his grip a few inches lower. "They were temporarily unable to supply us with the proper accoutrements," the physicist returned easily. "There will be a pair consigned to us before the afternoon has elapsed."

Winston groaned. "Now I know you're all right, Ray. Egon's pulled out his five dollar words again."

"Indubitably," Spengler returned, smiling.

Peter stood examining Ray for another moment, then reached out slowly and tilted his face up. "What about this?" he asked, using his free hand to brush the new dressing on Ray's forehead. "No concussion?"

Ray shook his head, freeing himself from Peter's light hold. "Nope. My ankle might keep me out for a couple days..."

"Weeks," Egon interjected firmly.

"...but that's it." He looked around, paying particular attention to the ceiling and floor. "Aren't Janine and Slimmer back from entertaining the kids down at the orphanage yet?"

Peter stared another second, his fingers trailing down to touch the small gauze patch on Ray's throat. "Not yet. They said about 4:30. I-I have to talk to you." Ray's smile flickered away at his heavy tone, and he purposely lightened it, though not without some bitterness. "Don't worry, this isn't an attack. I just want to talk."

Ray blinked, his shoulders drooping slightly at the barely concealed rebuke, but he nodded agreeably enough. "Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

Peter shot a glance first to a sobered Zeddemore, then to Egon, whose blond brows were bisected by a puzzled frown. He forced a smile of his own. "You mind, fellas? Got something I want to discuss with the boy wonder here." Not waiting for acknowledgement, he slid his arm under Egon's until Stantz was of necessity leaning more on him than on the physicist. Taking the hint, Egon withdrew, leaving Peter to support fully half of Ray's weight.

Winston, too, stepped back, placing a hand in the small of Egon's back. "C'mon," he offered, "I'm making stew and I need someone to chop onions."

"I hate chopping onions," the blond complained, nevertheless allowing Zeddemore to usher him toward the stairs. "My glasses fog and my sinuses obstruct."

"Obstructed sinuses, eh?" the Negro teased, glancing at the other's sizable schnazzola. "That could be serious. Maybe you better do the salad instead..."

Peter watched the two disappear up the stairs, an amused half-smile on his face at the repartee. Then he switched his attention to the man at his side, who was at this moment regarding him with large, wary eyes. "Think you can make it into my office?"

"Sure."

With Peter's assistance, the relocation was accomplished, and soon the two were established on the battered sofa Peter kept around for what he liked to term emergency napping. From there, one had an unobstructed view through the glass walls enclosing the office, albeit an inauspicious one of the rear of the garage. The two young men sat in uncomfortable silence for several seconds, then Ray cleared his throat.

"Um...Peter, if this is about the way I messed up the bust today..."

Startled out of his own reverie, Venkman glanced up, waving one hand disparagingly. "Winston and Egon got the last gooper. No big deal."

Stantz mulled that over, scratching his smooth chin. "You're mad at me for something else?"

There was a dust ball on the floor beside Peter's foot; he kicked it under the sofa, a frown creasing his handsome features. "What makes you think I'm mad about something?"

Ray rubbed absently at his stretched-out leg, carefully not looking at the older man. "You've been so short with everyone, it's kind of obvious you're mad about something. I-I wanted to help...I mean, to ask.... Whatever it was, I didn't mean it. You know that, don't you?"

There was so much earnestness in the apology that Peter patted his friend's leg, though his expression remained unchanged. "I'm not mad, Ray. But after what happened this afternoon, I'm..." he pursed his lips, choosing his words carefully, "...shall we say, concerned?"

Ray twined his hands fingers together, a nervous habit whenever he was under stress. His eyes, however, were completely without guile. "I don't understand."

Peter looked from Ray's clasped hands to his eyes and back to his hands. "You really don't *know*, do you? But you suspect. I can tell." When Ray didn't answer, Peter dropped his head into his palms, rubbing his face briskly. When he raised it again, the anger had returned, a tautness in his jaw that had ever bespoken imminent explosion. "Do I have to spell everything out?" he grunted, turning to face Stantz directly.

Only Ray's lips moved in response. "I think you'd better."

Green eyes narrowed, then Peter stood, his agitation finding expression in motion. "Why did you fall?"

Ray blinked. "Why? I wasn't paying attention and I slipped, that's all."

Venkman took a turn around the room, then came to stand over the engineer, hands on hips. "That's not all and you know it. The reason you fell was me."

Stantz protest was immediate. "That's not true, Peter! I slipped."

Peter scowled. In an abrupt move, he swooped down on the unsuspecting Stantz, lips parted and ugly silver temporary caps glinting in the artificial light. Brown eyes flying open, Ray uttered an alarmed cry and cringed backward until he was brought up short by the back of the couch, one hand coming up to protect his throat. Seeing this, Peter stopped, his reaching arms dropping to his sides. "That's what happened this afternoon," he rapped curtly. "That's why you fell."

Ray sagged, his breathing coming faster than before. "You're nuts! You startled me...."

"I *startled* you this afternoon," Peter snapped back. "And all I did was walk up behind you." He retreated a step, vision shifting from Ray's still-pale face to a picture hanging above his head. It showed old stone buildings, white with rimefrost. In the foreground, three men stood, their arms locked around each other's shoulders, wide grins on their faces. "Did you think I wouldn't know you were afraid of me?"

"That's not true!" But Ray's eyes betrayed the half-lie. He stopped, swallowed heavily, his normally soft voice growing even quieter. "Maybe...maybe sometimes I remember...some of what happened. But...that doesn't mean I blame you, Peter. It wasn't your fault. What happened was all my idea, after all."

Peter dropped back down onto the couch and absently smoothed a wrinkle in his gray sweat pants. "Don't apologize for saving my life, Ray. If not for you, I would have killed someone else and no one would ever have been able to help me."

Ray shifted uncomfortably under that faintly damning praise, shy self-deprecation in his

face. "That was only according to Turkish legend, but I didn't want to take a chance. I only gambled on a blood oath being binding. I didn't really *know* anything."

"Gamble paid off." Venkman met brown-amber eyes, remorse further creasing the harsh planes around his mouth. "Nearly cost you your life. Twice."

Color touched Ray's cheeks at that. "Like I said, I didn't even know if it would work. No big deal or anything." The seemingly simple statement elicited fresh irritation in Venkman; in a sudden burst, he slammed his fist into the side of the sofa, raising little puffs of dust from the old upholstery. Ray watched the display calmly, though his fingers continued to clamp tight. "Now are you going to tell me why you've been mad at me all week?"

Peter waved away the dust cloud, then sneezed and reached for a kleenex in the pocket of his sweatpants. "I said, I'm not mad—at least, not at you."

"Who, then?"

"Who?" Peter blew his nose and tossed the tissue into a nearby wastecan. "Nobody. Everybody. Me, maybe."

"You? Why would you be mad at yourself? Not about...what happened?"

"What happened." Peter hunched his shoulders forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "You don't even say it out loud, do you. Do you mention the subject even to yourself?" Ray began a disjointed protest, which Peter cut off by raising a hand. "What happened," he said brutally, "was that I tore your throat out. And *liked* it."

He turned glittering green eyes on the troubled brown, and Ray actually retreated several inches from the ferocity there before he could catch himself. "That wasn't you, Peter," he denied, touching the bandages on his neck in a self-conscious way. "It was *them*—the Q'utah. *They* cut me, not you."

"*They* were also *me*." Peter let the words hang in the still air, their echo growing until it was a solid wall between them. Ray stared back, troubled, then dropped his head, fixing the concrete floor with a steady look. Peter extinguished the blaze in his eyes, his tone muting slightly. "You think about it a lot."

"Only *sometimes*," was the stubborn response. "Not a lot."

"Sometimes is enough, I'd say." Again, anger finished its cycle and died away, and the deep sadness in the psychologist's expression was no less affecting. He and Ray sat shoulder to shoulder for long minutes, neither looking at the other, the comfortable harmony that had always existed between them for once missing. Finally, Peter roused himself from the spider's web of despair to invite, "Tell me how much you remember of that first night."

"I don't remember much," Stantz answered fretfully, his fingers continuing their agitated dance. "Not really."

Not good enough. "Tell me what you do remember."

Still not looking up, Ray took a deep breath, his words emerging haltingly, painfully. "I was in the chem lab checking some references on vampires."

"Is that what you were doing downstairs?" Peter said, surprised. "I wondered."

"When we didn't find anything in the sewer...and then you disappeared...." Ray glanced up at Peter and then away, wetting his lips with his tongue. "Tobin's didn't have anything; I hoped maybe Ryzczyk's Unspeakable Horrors would. Anyway, I heard someone moving around and found you under the stairs."

"Thought you were a prowler," Peter explained sheepishly. "Was about to give you

whatfor.”

“You needed blood...or something,” Ray finished shakily, not hearing the interruption, “and you took mine. That’s it.”

There was a chill in the air completely unrelated to the room’s temperature, yet not dissociated from those terse, bleak statements. Venkman shivered under its impact, the heat of anger completely gone and leaving nothing but icy analysis. “That’s not it, is it?” he said brutally. “You left out the best parts, like my fangs ripping open your throat, or how it felt to watch yourself bleed to death...while I enjoyed it.”

“Stop it, Peter!” Ray blurted, spinning on his companion with all the force of a desperate man. “It was them! *Them!*”

If it was his intention to make some dent in the other’s weary composure, he was doomed to disappointment; Peter went on unheeding, his tone so reasonable as to be that much more disturbing. “It’s in your mind all the time, isn’t it?” he prodded relentlessly, giving the engineer no respite. “Every time you look at me.”

Backed into a corner, Ray started to shake, a tiny shiver of suppressed stress only in his hands. “I can’t help it. I try, but....”

“But you can’t separate the two—not here.” Peter tapped his temple meaningfully. “That’s why when you saw me behind you this afternoon, you pulled back. That’s why you fell. That’s why I’m...quitting the team.”

Shock blanked the youthful features for a full thirty seconds. Ray’s mouth hung open, his eyes wide. “You...you don’t mean that,” he gasped finally, getting control of himself though his face had gone white. “You *can’t* mean that! Peter...!”

Venkman held up a hand. “The only reason, I repeat, the *only* reason any of us are alive right now is because we learned to trust each other *totally*, especially in a combat situation. Once we lose that, we’re no longer a team. That means one of us is going to go uncovered—or flinch away and fall, maybe to his death.” The cool tones faltered and he looked away. “I’m not prepared to let that happen.”

“But you can’t! It was *my* fault! Peter, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean.... You...!” The words trailed off into incoherency, seemingly making no impression on the other’s averted face. Finally, Ray fell silent, both hands raised helplessly. “Please.”

Ray sounded so miserable that Peter was moved to look up. He hesitated, then slipped an arm around the drooping shoulders. “Don’t look like that, kid. It’s not like I’m running out on you. I just won’t be going on busts anymore.” His voice broke and he was obliged to stop and take a deep breath. He swallowed and went on, “I’ll try and get an apartment nearby....”

Ray hung his head, covering his face with one hand. “I’m so sorry, Peter. This all my stupid fault.”

The psychologist pulled him closer until Ray was leaning against him. There was a weary surrender in Peter’s features—the look of a man whose mind is made up, little though he liked the verdict. It might have been mistaken for conviction if the devastation in his eyes had not belied the facade for the fraud it was. “Don’t, Ray! After what you went through, you have to expect a certain amount of trauma. You can’t help feeling the effects.” Ray didn’t look up and Peter raised his free hand to thread his fingers in the fine auburn hair, sighing deeply at the contact. “It’ll go away Ray. Just give it some time.”

Ray uncovered his eyes and peeked up, freeing his hair without leaving the circle of the

older man's arm. "Doesn't that apply to you, too? You went through more than I did: And you've been so...."

"So what?" Peter asked with distant curiosity.

"Unapproachable. Mad and distant and.... Egon said if we gave you some space, you'd work it out and be all right again. I...guess he was wrong." He twisted until he could grasp Peter's left hand with both of his own. "Can't you see? The Q'utah messed with *your* head, not mine. *You're* the one not thinking straight—you can't be if you think leaving is going to help!"

"*I'm* not the one who fell," Peter reminded him curtly, his tone uncharacteristically defensive.

Ray accepted that with relative aplomb. "What do *you* remember, Peter?"

Venkman spent several full minutes examining the glass office partition, that far away look returning. "For two and a half days, I was dirty and hungry and scared out of my mind. I wasn't sure if you were dead...or worse. I...can't remember ever being that miserable." He shuddered and Ray leaned closer, slipping his arm under Peter's and around the older man's back. Peter secured his own grip on Ray's shoulders, seeming to draw strength from his friend's touch. They sat like that silently for a long time, Ray rubbing his back, Peter resting his cheek on soft hair. Ever so slowly, the contact had its effect: the agonized expression faded, leaving Peter looking spent, yet with a tenderness softening the rough edges that had not been there before. Finally, he straightened, hesitantly meeting Ray's openly compassionate gaze. "The whole experience wasn't horrible. Part of it I...cherish."

"When was that?" Ray asked encouragingly, not loosing his hold one iota.

Fine lips quirked in a smile. "While we were in contact...I was inside of your head—emotions, memories, experiences—everything. For a while, I actually *was* you...sort of."

Ray stirred, pulling back just far enough to see Peter clearly. "*I thought* I felt something touch my mind, but I couldn't really tell. It was so vague you couldn't have been broadcasting." He frowned, looking uncomfortable. "You know *everything* about me?"

Peter didn't answer at first. He regarded the youthful face consideringly. "I always wondered what your mother looked like. Those old black-and-white photos you have are faded. She was lovely—so young and full of life. You resemble her quite a bit."

Ray dropped his eyes, a very old pain stirring their liquid amber depths. "Everyone said she was beautiful. Most of the time. Bad things made her so sad, though. That was...a lot of the time near the-the end."

Peter smiled reminiscently. "Very beautiful. Curly red hair and dark brown eyes. I didn't expect her to be that fragile." He waved a hand humorously. "Hey, if she wasn't married, I'd've taken a crack at her!"

"I miss her a lot."

The tones were so choked that Peter turned to look at him sharply. "I know you do, kiddo; I did, too, when I was you. Saw Pa Hanley, that low-life scumbag. If I could have...."

"He's not important," Ray interrupted quickly with a flash of alarm.

"And," Peter finished mercilessly, but with a touch of the whimsical, "Lorna."

Ray blinked. "Lorna? My cow Lorna? You know about her?"

Peter shrugged, mischief dancing in bright green eyes. "A bit. Big thing—at least she looked big when you're seeing through the eyes of a ten-year-old. Moo-moo face, wet, scratchy tongue."

A slow smile smoothed lines of concern. "I used to really love Lorna. They let me raise her myself after her mother rejected her. She was one of my best friends on the Hanley place." He grinned, a brief, embarrassed flash of white teeth. "Kind of weird keeping a cow for a pet on a working farm."

"Working farm?" Peter delicately cleared his throat. "You...um...didn't eat her or anything, did you?"

Ray looked scandalized at that, then somewhat sad. "Mr. Hanley wanted to slaughter Lorna when she was a couple years old. We ran away. They caught me and brought me back, but by then one of the neighboring farmers, Mr. Olsen, had agreed to take Lorna as a milk cow. He promised me he'd wouldn't kill her and Pa Hanley never found out what happened." He bit his lip, defiance jutting out his jaw. "He was mad for a long time, but I never told him where she was. Never."

"Couldn't have been easy to keep quiet," Peter murmured, uncertain temper smoldering. "I felt that strap of his, that lousy—"

"I don't want to talk about him," Ray pleaded quietly, eyes hooded. "Or Mom or.... I...guess you know all about them, anyway."

Peter laughed shortly. "Hardly everything. All I remember are a few flashes. Does that make you uncomfortable with me?"

"Should it?" Ray rejoined in tones Peter himself might have used.

Peter laughed again, this time with genuine amusement. "You've been hanging around me too long. Since you never talk about your past, I just assumed it's something you don't want me to know. If not, my finding out what you're keeping to yourself is bound to make you uncomfortable with me." He waved a hand expansively. "*Quod Erat Demonstrandum*."

Ray pondered that a moment, resting his chin in his palm. "It's not that I don't want you to know anything about me," he said slowly, carefully not looking in Peter's direction. "It's just...I don't want to think about...that time. I want to live in *this* time." He looked up. "Is that so bad? To want to live only for now?"

Peter tightened his hold around Ray's shoulders, leaning forward himself until he was inches from the questioning brown eyes. "The past shapes the present," he explained gently. "The only way to stop it from affecting you—or hurting you—is to bring it into the light and deal with it for what it is or was. Running away from it won't eliminate the problem."

Ray's bright eyes lightened. "The Q'utah...everything that happened—that was in the past, too. It can't hurt us now if you don't run away from it. We have to deal with it together, right?"

Sensing the unaccustomed precipice of threatened defeat crumbling beneath him, Peter pulled back, clasping his hands behind his head and affecting a pseudo-casual pose. "Argument won't wash, bunky. That..." he jerked a thumb at Ray's bandaged ankle, then reclasped it behind his head, "...happened today, not last week, and dealing with it means preventing it from happening again. That's the whole point of this discussion."

Ray stared at him helplessly, fresh pain in his eyes mixed with an older, resurfacing emotion that Peter acknowledged hating for years. Peter, seeing this, sat up straighter and took him by the shoulders. "Don't even think it," he ordered firmly, giving the younger man a shake. "My leaving has nothing to do with blame and it's not your fault. It's just..." he waved one hand, his rational tone breaking under the strain of maintaining an insincere facade, "...the result of circum-

stances.”

“You sound like Egon,” Ray returned in a choked voice. “But it’s not right. You can’t....”

“Peter!” That strident, slightly nasal bass jerked both their heads up. Filling the entire doorway stood a tall, blue-clad physicist with red glasses, blond hair and an *very* forbidding expression. “You and I have something to discuss, I believe,” he rumbled, stalking forward.

“He’s going to quit the team!” Ray wailed, regarding Egon beseechingly. “You’ve got to do something!”

“You told,” Peter accused the black man following in Spengler’s wake.

Zeddemore shrugged. “Not into abetting some idiot’s self-demolition,” he returned unapologetically. He leaned one hip against Peter’s heavy wooden desk, his boot clunking against its side. “Did you think it was going to be easy to walk out on us? If so, you’re doin’ really bad drugs, homeboy.”

Peter sighed deeply, the hunted look that he’d worn for several days returning with a vengeance. He released Ray and stood to face the advancing blond squarely, his body tensed as though for combat. “I think you should hear my side,” he began reasonably.

Egon dismissed that with an impatient gesture. “I don’t need to hear your side if it includes your leaving the team.” He placed his fists on his hips belligerently, regarding Venkman from a distance of less than a foot. Egon’s blue eyes held a curious mixture of severity and a sympathy even his thick lenses could not hide. “It was obviously a miscalculation to leave you unattended for any length of time. Your logic circuits disengaged.”

Peter smiled bleakly. “My logic circuits are working all too well,” he returned. “That’s the problem.”

“You logic circuits haven’t been in working order for *days*,” the blond snapped back, full lips thinned with annoyance. “What possible justification could your warped mind have come up with for walking out on the team?”

Had he been physically slapped, Peter could not have flinched as visibly at those words. He unsuccessfully attempted to cover the reaction by crossing his arms across his chest, for once unable to create a casual veneer. “It’s not a matter of walking out,” he protested. “This is necessary.” Unable to turn away from Egon’s riveting stare, his green eyes dulled, shadowed from within. “If I stay I could be danger to you all. Ask Ray. He knows how...pleasurable it was for me while I was feeding. And there’s a constant echo in the back of my head reminding me of how great it was to feel...sated.” He did escape the sharp field of blue then, dipping his head to sink into Ray’s gentle brown eyes. “The Q’utah might be gone, but how can we be sure their influence is? That hunger was overwhelming; what if it comes back? What if I revert to what I was?”

“Do you *feel* any continuing influence?” Egon asked worriedly. “Your readings have remained normal since we trapped the Q’utah.”

That brought Peter around in a flash. “Ah-HA! So you *have* been keeping watch on me. Your suspicions were aroused, too, eh?”

Egon shook his head definitely. “Not at all, Peter. I consider it standard procedure to test and retest any data which comes into my possession. The phenomenon of your enslavement was unique and I was curious as to any long term effects on your own psi-readings.” He looked uncomfortable. “I...must admit I was a little uneasy as well. Your behavior has been erratic of late and....”

“Just like I told ya, Pete,” Winston interjected when the blond stumbled to a confused halt.

"None of us knew how to approach you and it worried us. You know Egon—scientific road first."

"He's right." That was Ray, his soft voice hesitant as though expecting a rebuff. "You wouldn't tell us what was wrong and—"

Peter returned his stare to the younger man, baring his teeth fractionally to reveal the silver caps. "And what does that have to do with whether or not I'm going to revert to type?" he interrupted without apology. "If my natural psionics have been affected by the alien contact, we could *all* be up the creek. Especially you." He turned, switching his glare to Spengler. "And don't try to tell me it can't happen, Egon. This is *my* field, remember, and I know it's a possibility."

"Nothing is *impossible*," the physicist agreed. "However, statistically, the probability line hovers in the one-percent range. And *that*, my friend, is *my* field."

Peter stared. "You worked it out?"

Egon stared back. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

Peter waved a hand. "Sorry. Forgot who I was talking. Of course you worked it out." He paused, letting the blond's words sink in. "One percent, eh? That low?"

"Based on the quantitative table you and Professor Stubbs worked out two years ago," Egon returned easily, "and the readings I've been taking, one percent is actually a generous estimate." The blond head shook head with honest bafflement. "You *cannot* believe your presence constitutes a genuine danger to Ray, Winston or myself? After all we've been through together—after all we've faced *together*—can you honestly look into your heart and say that?"

Peter shook his head stubbornly. "My heart? Not the *logical* approach I was expecting from you, Spengs. But to answer your question, forget my heart—I can look into that bruise on Ray's face and say that."

"But, Peter..." Ray began desperately, fingering the small bandage on his forehead.

Egon cut him off by spinning on him. "Raymond, when you were attacked by those terror dogs last year, who was it that drove them off?"

"Peter did," Stantz returned promptly.

"And whose plan was it that forced the nether-entity Plague to release you from her sickness?"

"Peter!" Ray answered again with even more force, eyes fixed on Venkman's. The psychologist, however, seemed fascinated by the intense sapphire stare again boring into him from behind Egon's red frames.

"It was Peter who dug me out when that wall collapsed last month," Winston chimed in, reading Egon's tactics accurately. "He saved my life that day."

"And who came after me when my body was being used by that N-E?" Egon finished in the triumphant tones of one who has just won a major battle. "Dr. Venkman, would you care to assess the probable consequences to Ray, Winston or myself had you been absent on any one of those occasions?"

Winston tapped the desk, waiting until he had Peter's reluctant attention. "Or a hundred other occasions." He leaned forward, reaching across to slap Peter hard on the chest. "You're part of this team, homeboy. Without you, we'd've been dead a long time ago."

"Not trusting me can accomplish the same thing," Peter commented pointedly and to no one in particular. He dropped back onto the sofa abruptly, as though his legs could no longer

hold him, then turned to pierce Ray with a glance. "It nearly did today. You could have broken your neck."

"Shoot. Seein' your ugly mug would have made me jump, too," Winston broke in, making a weak attempt at humor.

"But I didn't break my neck." Ray snagged Peter's sleeve, his expression was earnest and pleading. "Nothing happened to me today worse than a bump on the head and a sprained ankle. We've all gotten worse than that playing touch football! Nothing happened except...what you're doing right now." He choked off, dropping his eyes. When he resumed, there was more pleading in his voice and his fingers twisted gray cotton. "Maybe I...do have some problems with what happened with the Q'utah. Sometimes when I'm asleep..." He stopped, visibly forcing his head back up. "You say I'll get over what happened in time, but you're not even willing to give me that time."

"You're even *less* willing to give *yourself* that time," Zeddemore interjected. "You had it worse than Ray. Who are you, Superman?"

Ray went on as though the black man had not spoken. "Peter, it's only been a couple of days since what happened...since the Q'utah *made* you attack me." He released Peter's sleeve to take his hand, holding it tight with both his own. "You were the one who mentioned traumatic effects and that we'd have to do some healing."

Egon knelt by the couch, resting one large hand on the clasped ones of Peter and Ray. "You, Raymond and myself have been together better than ten years! Don't we deserve a little time to heal before you decide to throw it all away? Before you throw *us* away?"

His kindly tone caused Peter's face to crumble, the defensive determination fading into open need. "It could cost your life, Egon. It nearly cost Ray's. How can I...?"

Stantz managed to wave that away without releasing Peter's hand. "You could *never* hurt me, Peter, not deliberately and not because of them. I know that—I always did. Even when the Q'utah had you, I knew you wouldn't kill me."

"We all knew that," Winston interjected quietly. "No matter what the Q'utah had done to you, inside you were still a man—a man we all loved."

"And trusted," Spengler added, his deep bass a caress.

"I wish I could believe that." And this much was truth, for this was the core of Peter's ache. "The Q'utah augmented a psionically empathic state, especially while they were...while we were feeding. I could tap into Ray's emotions as if they were my own." He licked dry lips, avoiding his comrades' eyes by gazing steadily out the open glass door. "I remember when the flavor changed. It wasn't sweet trust I was tasting—it was fear."

Ray released Peter with one hand to touch his own throat, paling again at the returned memory. "I *was* afraid," he confessed softly, as to himself. "I was scared to death. I could feel myself..."

"Dying."

Ray shivered. "Yeah. But, Peter, I was scared of what was happening; I was never scared of *you*." He tugged on Peter's arm, though the psychologist refused to look his way. "After I woke up, I was even more scared—not *of* you, but *for* you! We didn't know what had happened to you or even if you were still alive. Or if we could save you or..."

Shifting slightly, Peter wove his fingers through Ray's, reaching for Egon's hand through them. "How could you not have been afraid of me?" he asked in a quavering voice. "It's normal

to be afraid, and it was me that was doing it all to you." His jaw jutted forward, teeth clenched tight. "I remember how much trust there was in you even when I was ripping your throat open. I remember what it tasted like when you were afraid. I *know* what you felt."

Ray shook their clenched hands roughly, his face a study in denial. "But not who it was directed at. Never at you, Peter. At the Q'utah, but not you. Not ever." He stopped, squeezing Peter's hand for all he was worth. "Don't leave us, Peter. Please."

Egon slid onto the couch, then slipped his arm around Peter's shoulders, holding onto him as Ray was, the psychologist being bracketed between them. "You care enough about our well-being to force yourself to leave us," Egon murmured close to his ear. "Care enough to stay."

"You've got to know we need you, homeboy," Winston added for good measure. He stepped across Ray's injured leg and sat on the engineer's far side, twisting until he could look into dulled green eyes. "Take it from someone who's been where you are. Everyone who ever fought in Viet Nam knows what it's like to be used as a pawn; the trick is to not let it stop you. Keep going or the user wins in the end."

"I've never seen Dr. Peter Venkman give up on anything." Egon tightened his hold. "I refuse to believe I shall see that now."

"Please, Peter," Ray breathed, fixing the mute psychologist with so imploring a look that Peter swallowed heavily. "Stay."

Emerald eyes locked with amber, his own voice hoarse, his expression tender. "I don't want anything to happen to you. Anything else," he amended, glancing at the ugly white bandages on Ray's throat. "But..." He turned to the others, first Winston, who was unconsciously holding his breath, then Egon, whose strong features were taut with apprehension. "Maybe we *do* need some time...."

"Time heals," Ray prodded softly. "Isn't that what you're always telling us?"

Peter considered this carefully, lips pursed. Slowly, he nodded, taut muscles sagging. "Okay. You win. I guess we're worth some healing time, after all." This statement was met with cheers and hugs from all sides. Peter grinned. "You know, it's bad enough fighting the three of you guys; it's dirty pool making me fight me, too."

"Guess you were always meant to be on our side, homeboy," Winston said, ruffling Peter's hair fondly. "Even against yourself."

Peter reflected, absently finger combing his thick brown locks back into place. "We all do need some time—away from the pressures to..."

"Heal?" Egon suggested.

"...Relax," Peter finished firmly. "We're all too tense. I know I'm not up to doing any busts for a while."

"Got your solution," Winston said. "How about a vacation?"

The couch groaned as Ray moved, practically jumping up and down in sudden excitement. "A vacation! Great idea! We could go back to Tahiti...."

"Not enough money," Peter vetoed practically.

"Florida?" Egon suggested, pulling off his glasses and polishing them on his sleeve.

"Flying cockroaches," the psychologist returned with a theatrical shudder. "Hated it last time I was there."

"Cousin Sam's?" Ray suggested timidly. This was greeted by a chorus of groans. He visibly wilted. "Or someplace else."

"Definitely someplace else, Tex." To remove any possible sting from the rejection, Peter hesitantly draped his arm around the younger man's neck in easy affection. Rather than pulling away, Ray leaned against him with a grin and Peter heaved a near inaudible sigh of pure contentment. He slumped back against Egon's chest, his casual pose no longer pretense, his own grin even wider than Ray's. "I vote for a week at Asbury Park. It's close, we're off-season, and we might catch the Boss at the Stone Pony if our timing's right. What'd'ya say?"

Nodding slowly, Zeddemore again reached across Ray to pat Peter on the head, much to Peter's expressed annoyance. "I say Springsteen is on tour, but Asbury Park sounds good to me."

"I don't care *where* we go." Ray's entire face glowed, his eyes reflecting the fluorescent lights like twin stars. "As long as you're not going to leave us."

"As if we'd permit that," Egon added, poking Peter in the ribs playfully. "The odds of your actually succeeding in such an endeavor are excruciatingly minuscule."

Peter looked at each of his three friends—the affection-softened angles of Egon's face, the sheer adoration in Ray's amber eyes, the brotherly affection in Winston's open smile—and his own expression regained what the Q'utah had taken—the tranquillity of a man who knows he is loved. "When you're right, you're right, Spengs-baby...whatever you said."

"In your own vernacular," Egon translated, giving Peter another poke, then having to cover his ribs when the psychologist retaliated with a vengeance, "the translation is...."

"I know." Peter grinned. "Cowabunga! The Four Amigos ride again!"





THE VERY KNIVES OF MINCER



Mr Stakespeare
Infamous Playwraith
of Vampiric Verses

Where's Dick, the butcher of Ashford?

Jack Cade, II Henry VI, 4,3

Has he dined, canst thou tell?

Menemius, Coriolanus, 5,2

I desir'd him to come home to dinner.

Dromio, The Comedy of
Errors, 2,1

This night he makes a supper, and a great one.

Lord Chamberlain,
Henry VIII, 1,3

He have made an oyster of me.

Benedick, Much Ado About
Nothing, 2,3

Why, then the world's mine oyster, which I with
sword will open.

Pistol, The Merry Wives
of Windsor, 2,2

My half-supp'd sword that frankly would have fed,
Pleas'd with this dainty bait, thus goes to bed.

Achilles, Troilus & Cressida, 5,9

There is a dish of leather-coats for you.

Davy, II Henry IV, 5,3

These clothes are good enough to drink in,
And so be these boots too.

Sir Toby, Twelfth Night, 1,3

I smell it.

Hotspur, I Henry IV, 1,3

The feast is ready.

Marcus, Titus Andronicus, 5,3

Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods.

Brutus, Julius Caesar, 2,1

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man;
They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;
They eat us hungrily, and when they are full
They belch us.

Emilia, Othello, 3,4

Here, take away this dish.

Petruchio, The Taming of
the Shrew, 4,3

I have supp'd full with horrors.

MacBeth, 5,5

Distraction

By: B.N. Fish

(Story #1 in the Night Tales Universe)

"So, who is he?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, that's just Nick."

"What, your own personal groupie?" I didn't bother to look at either Bentzk or the disappearing shadow of the man he had been talking to. I was busy with another bit of human flotsam.

"Yeah, sure," the police officer replied.

"Obviously, he sees something in you that nobody else does," I said without thinking. *Who were you?* I silently asked the body under my hands.

Pathology is not a place for the squeamish or sentimental. While queasiness might not be a real problem for me, unfortunately, sentimental observations are. I needed a distraction. This Nick would serve as well as any, especially since I wasn't having to zip him up in a body bag at the moment.

Officer Bentzk spoke up, "I think he sees something in the job. He was breaking up a street fight when I first met him."

"He was breaking it up, or they were breaking him up?"

"Oh, he was doing the breaking, all right. He was tossing those kids around like ten pins when we showed up."

I hadn't seen that much of the man, but he didn't look to have that kind of muscle. It wasn't important. I put the matter from my mind as I got into the coroner's wagon.

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The next time I saw the stranger, a few more questions came up. We'd arrived on the scene to an abundance of activity.

"You might hang around after you're done with him," said Det. Claney. "We may have another one."

"Where?" I asked as I tended to my charge.

"Right now, he's up there," Claney pointed skyward, "with a hostage."

"Great." After I finished, I found my way into the building, and by way of directions from every

one in said building, up on the roof. There were several men by the door, but out at the edge, I could make out dim silhouettes. There was a space between two of the shadows. This had to be the perp and one of the policemen. Where was the hostage?

"Hey, Doc. What are you doing up here?" a patrolman asked.

"Just looking around."

"Could you take a look at Mrs. Simmons? She seems all right. But just in case?"

"Mrs. Simmons?"

"Yeah, the hostage."

So I checked over a rather dazed middle-aged woman. "What happened?" I asked the officer while I gave the woman a cursory exam.

"Nick got her away. We're giving him twenty minutes with the perp. Then the sharpshooter gets his chance."

"You're letting a civilian do this?"

"Not much choice. The junkie wasn't listening to anyone else. It's a long story."

"You're okay, but you still should go to your own doctor to be sure," I told the woman finally.

She nodded distractedly. I was distracted myself. Just who was this guy?

I went around to the far side, so I could see his face. That put me pretty much by myself, since most of the others were watching the perp. Even the few cops on my side of the roof were attentive to the possible jumper, not the young man talking to him.

Nick was young, late twenties, early thirties. Tall, dark hair, lean features. And blue eyes, strange, almost glittering blue eyes. It must have been the lighting.

He was speaking too low to be understood. He put out his hand, but the junkie was shaking badly. Suddenly, the perp jerked away and tried to jump. Tried. Somehow, the slender young man caught him and pulled him back. Then both men were literally covered with about half a dozen policemen.

When the melee straightened itself out, I attached myself to the groupie.

"Hi," I greeted, "I'm Jack Farrel."

"Nick Knight. Are you with the police?"

I noted with interest that now his eyes were deep in shadow. I couldn't even tell what color they were. "I'm a pathologist," I said.

"A doctor? What are you doing up here?"

We started down the stairs.

"I'm here more by way of morbid curiosity. One of the guys on the street said you might have someone else for me. I was more than happy for him to be wrong. So how did you do it?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Lucky?" I questioned. "I was watching you. You had him mesmerized."

"Not too well, obviously. He almost jumped."

"Almost" nothing. I was watching, remember? He did jump. You caught him."

"I'm stronger than I look," he shrugged.

"Obviously. So what do you do for a living? There can't be much money following cop cars around...unless you're a reporter?" It occurred to me even as I said it that that was exactly what I did for a living.

"No, not me. I'm into computers," he said.

We reached ground level. That's when I found my wagon gone.

"Need a lift?" the young man offered.

"It would seem so. Thanks."

"The only problem is that it's getting late. I've got to meet somebody at my place at 6:30. I can take you there and then you can call a cab or something?"

"Sure. It's better than nothing."

Nick led the way to a shiny, old, black Cadillac.

"I like your taste in motor vehicles," I admired.

"Thanks," he smiled, patting the dash. "One of my vices."

"As vices go, this one should get you into heaven. There's been a lot of care put into this."

"It's the next best thing to flying for getting around."

"You fly?"

"Whenever, however I can.

We got in and headed out.

"You're just full of vices, aren't you?" I teased.

"Fraid so."

"Well, at least they seem to be somewhat constructive ones."

"I could wish."

Nick slowed in front of an old movie theater. Then he pulled into an alley and a converted garage. Sure enough, he led the way back to the movie house.

"You live here?" I asked.

"Why not?"

Why not, indeed?

He punched in a security code and we entered the building, went up in an elevator and into what must have been a ballroom in the old days. I nodded to myself as I took in the spacious clutter in the room.

"Well, it's not exactly typical, but it is definitely bachelor," I muttered.

"Why do you say that?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean for you to hear that."

"Why?"

I chose to answer the first question. "For some reason, whenever two people live together, usually one of them cooks." I pointed to the empty shelves and took an impulsive peek into his small refrigerator. There was one amber bottle inside. "My mother would be appalled," I said.

"Remind me not to invite her. The phone is over there."

"Sure," I said as I went over and made my call. "Taxi'll be here in ten minutes," I announced as I hung up. "So, how close was I?"

"Close enough."

"Good. I've got this Sherlock Holmes complex. My wife's always calling me on it."

"You're married, then."

"Very married. Two kids' worth and a mortgage," I grinned.

"You look happy about it, at least."

"I am. I'm the proverbial lucky man."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you," I said with a bow. "What about you?"

"No. I'm a never-was."

"What, never?" I quoted in mock-surprise.

"Not even 'hardly ever'."

"That's hard to believe," I said seriously. He seemed like a likable enough young man.

"It just never worked out," he shrugged.

"Well, I should go on down," I said. "One more question and I'll get out of your hair. How did you come to be a police groupie?"

"I was a cop, detective grade, in Chicago for a while."

"A cop?" He almost didn't look old enough.

"It takes all kinds," he shrugged. "I needed a change, so I came out here."

"But you can't keep away from it, huh?"

"It doesn't seem like it. I'd been out of it for about a year. I was out taking a midnight stroll and—wham! Here I am again."

"Breaking up a street fight. A 'knight in shining armor,' I do believe," I grinned.

He sighed loudly. "Thanks. I needed that."

"Sorry. I couldn't resist."

"Most people can't."

"The police can always use another hand, you know," I offered.

"I know. I've been thinking about it. We'll see."

I nodded and made a discreet exit.

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Sure enough, the next time I saw him, it was in an official capacity.

"So you finally made the plunge, huh?" I greeted him, then tuned him—and the world—out as I looked over my latest 'patient.' A child. A beaten child. Blood and bruises. *Beaten to death?* I closed my eyes briefly and then got to work. Finally, I was done with the on-the-scene preliminaries. I straightened wearily.

"Any leads?" I asked, when I found him still at my elbow.

"Not much. We don't even know who she is."

"Well, maybe I'll get lucky."

He didn't even nod.

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The real surprise came when he turned up later at the lab.

"Is there something I can do for you?" I asked politely.

"Yeah," he said. "I want to watch you get lucky."

"What? You want to watch the autopsy?"

"Do you mind?"

I shrugged. "Not if you don't. Just stay out of the way."

He stepped back.

I got to work. I lost track of time, looking up only rarely, and then only vaguely registering that he was still there. When the job was finally over, I stretched, trying to ease the tangle in my mind, as well as in my back. *How could anyone do that to a child?*

"Anything?" came a voice.

I looked to see that young face watching me. And he didn't even look slightly green. I felt rather puce, myself.

"Well," I said finally, "you'll have to wait for the lab results for it to be official, but it looks like...exactly what it looks like," I finished sadly.

"You're in a hard line of work, Doctor," he said softly.

"Don't I know it. Especially when it's like this."

"Can I get you something? Coffee?"

I sighed and shut off the recorder. "Make it tea and you've got a deal."

"You're on."

I watched him find the water on the hot plate. His movements were sure and steady, as he positioned tea bag and cup. *I should be so steady.*

"You've seen autopsies before," I announced.

"A few."

"How few?"

"Fifty, a hundred. I can't say that I've tried to keep count. Have you?" He handed me the steaming cup.

"No," I admitted. "There're no clues at all?"

"I'm not done looking yet. But so far, no."

"Damn."

"Agreed. Whole heartedly."

"If there's any way I can help...?" I offered.

The young man nodded that he would keep me in mind if something came up. "You done for the night?"

"Not hardly. I've got another two and a half glorious hours to go."

"Lucky you."

"Yeah." I took a breath, "You've got to get him, Nick. You've *got* to."

"I'm going to try," he said softly.

I studied him again. "Just how old are you?" I blurted out without thinking.

"What? ...Oh, a hundred sixty-four my next birthday."

Okay, so I deserved that. "You could have just said over twenty-one," I grumbled.

"That is over twenty-one. See you around, Doctor." He started to leave.

"Knight?" I called after him. "Good luck."

"To us both," he said with a wave.

Then he was gone.

A hundred sixty-four, huh? Why, when I looked at him from certain angles, did that seem a very real possibility? Especially the eyes. The eerie blue eyes I had seen on the roof top had trouble reconciling with the soft, dark eyes I had seen watch me here tonight.

Then another body came in, so I had to stop my non-productive rambling of the mind, for the moment.

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The next time I saw Nick Knight, he'd been called in as backup for an armed robbery. I nodded toward him as I tended the late robber. Later, I went up to him as he was getting ready to leave in his car.

"How's it going?" I asked conversationally.

"Well enough, I suppose."

"Anything on the little girl?"

"We've got a name. Crystal Hawkins. Her parents reported her missing about eight hours before we found her."

"Missing? You mean, abducted?"

"It looks that way now. But at the time, they thought she had just gone exploring. They had the whole neighborhood out looking for her. But she wasn't found in the neighborhood."

"I remember," I said. It had been in a back alley toward the docks.

A voice came up over the Cadillac's car radio, "Attention all units. Shots fired at 1634 Lexington

Road."

Nick grabbed the mike. "This is 81-Kilo. I'm on my way." He hung up the mike. "See ya around, Doc."

"Hey, what about your partner?"

"You're looking at him," he called as he drove away.

Alone and at night? Not the choice of a stable mind. Yet he seemed reasonable enough. It made for a few more questions to add to my collection about Det. Knight.

* * *

The next time questions came up, Nick wasn't even around.

Another body had been brought in. A few inquiries produced the fact that Knight had been assisting again. The dead man had been welding a knife with abandon and a certain amount of skill. 'Gallahad' had been trying to distract the knifer and had gotten himself into a hand-to-hand. In the scuffle, Officer Karney had shot and killed the attacker. The body had been brought to me. Nick had gone home.

What do you mean 'gone home'?

But all anyone could tell me was that Det. Knight had refused any medical help and had taken off immediately afterwards.

While I chewed on that one, I ran the preliminary checks on the body. I found traces of blood on the outside of the knifer's jacket. Nick's blood? I took samples and went on with the autopsy. Nothing unexpected came up during the proceedings, except for a broken arm that almost looked as if it had been caught in a vise. That job done, I looked the number up, then called the theater Nick called home.

His answering machine was on.

"This is Dr. Farrel," I said into the phone. "I just wanted to see how you were doing. And to tell you that if you haven't seen a doctor, you should." I frowned and hung up.

I frowned again when I got the results of the tests. Jenkins, the knifer, had been A-positive. The blood on the jacket had been different. Not so surprising. But the lab hadn't been able to determine what type it was. A little double-checking revealed they weren't even sure the blood was human. It was probably due to a poor sample, was the official reason.

Curiouser and curiouser. As a distraction, this Detective Knight is getting better and better. I was almost surprised when Nick called me back the next night.

"Hi, Doctor. How you doing?" he greeted.

"That's my line. How are you doing?"

"Pretty good, thanks."

"Why didn't you go to a doctor?" I asked.

"Didn't need to. I'm fine."

"I've got a blood sample that says otherwise. What's the matter? Have you got something against the medical profession?"

"Who me? ...Well, maybe."

"And why is that?"

"Everyone I ever met who has gone to a doctor has still died eventually," he said lightly.

"And those who don't go tend to die a lot sooner," I snapped.

"Not me. I'm working on my immortality."

"You and everyone else in the world."

He laughed. "Don't worry about me, Doc. I am fine."

"Tell you what, Gallahad, the next time I see you, I'll take a look."

"Please. Make it Nick. And, okay, the next time."

"Good enough. By the way, what's your blood type?" I asked.

Nick hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"Well, I can dig it out of your records."

"Why?"

A reasonable question. "I'm basically nosey," I admitted. "There was some kind of mix-up with the tests."

"Ah, it is somewhat rare, I understand."

I could hear the back-pedaling in his voice. "Don't worry about it," I said, trying to be reassuring. "I'm not going to strip you down for a physical. There was just an oddity in the sample, is all. Have you heard anything about the little girl?"

"Not really. Somebody may have seen a stranger hanging around the neighborhood. A green car, or was it blue? A black man, or maybe not. Tall, but not that tall. You get the idea."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah."

I waited a moment, but when he didn't add anything, I said, "Okay, I'll let you go. If you have any problems, come see me. I won't even take a quart of blood."

"You promised no physical."

"Not unless you're dying at my feet," I swore.

"You're on, Doc."

"Be careful."

"I will. See ya." He hung up.

I'd have to watch that. As if Sherlock Holmes wasn't bad enough, now I was getting into my Jewish mother mode. My wife said I could be all too good at it at times. Some people needed it, however. And I had a feeling this young man could be a special case.

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The next time I saw Nick was a turning point in more ways than one. He'd been backup again on an armed assault situation that ended up with two people dead: one victim, one perp. I'd gotten the young man over by his car, trying to determine how he was feeling and how he had been hurt in the earlier knifing. He was doing a great job of putting me off when a call on the radio rescued him.

"81-Kilo, see the man. Wants to talk to you about the child killing. At 84th and Lexington. Said the name was Topper?"

"81-Kilo. I've got it. On my way," Nick replied, climbing into the Caddy.

"Mind if I come along?" I asked impulsively, even as I thought, *What am I doing?*

There was only a moment's hesitation before he nodded. "Just stay out of the way. I might need you."

I got into the massive car. 84th and Lexington was not that far away. Nick pulled over to the curb and scanned the street. So did I, but I didn't know what I was looking for.

"Where is he?" Nick muttered, getting out of the car.

I did the same. All I could see were a couple of hookers and a drunk.

"There," he announced and headed for an alley.

I still couldn't see anything, but I followed. Sure enough, an old man was there, whispering and pointing furiously. A woman looked back down the alley. Street people.

"Okay. Now, you stay here," Nick told them with familiarity as he started down the dark way.

"And keep an eye on the doctor."

"I beg your pardon," I said irritated. He was acting the Jewish mother himself.

"Okay, Nicky," the man called after him. "We'll keep him here." There were Jewish mothers abounding around here.

"Oh, no, you don't," I said as I slipped by the two old people to catch up with the detective. Where was he?

There was more darkness than light in the alley. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I felt a hand close around my arm.

"You were going to stay out of the way," Nick whispered. "Remember, Doctor?"

"I lied," I said when my heart started again. "What's up?"

"They saw someone carrying a child up there."

"So?"

"The child was bruised, like it had been beaten, and unconscious. Listen."

All I could hear were street sounds.

"Stay here," he hissed, moving forward.

Momentary insanity notwithstanding, I followed. The young man was moving quickly; he pulled down a fire escape with a minimum of noise and went up.

I was marveling at the remarkable condition of the fire escape until I started to climb. The thing creaked and groaned enough to wake the dead. I followed as best I could the shadow of my detective. I stopped at the window I thought he had gone into.

The room was empty. Lights were everywhere. The door was half open. Gingerly, I climbed into the room. Where now?

I looked down the hall. There was a sound from the stairwell. What did I have to lose? I shrugged. *My life, maybe?* came the little voice in my head.

But I kept going. I ended up on the roof. I would have sworn that no one else was there until a shrill voice broke the silence.

"She's mine."

A woman's voice. *A sane woman's voice?*

A soft drone seemed to answer. It had to be Nick. As I got closer, I saw a large woman struggling with a squirming two-year-old. Nick was ten feet away, reaching out to them. I stayed well back.

Better late than never, my little voice opined.

"She's been bad," said the woman. "She has to be punished."

"Why?" came a soft hum.

"She tried to run away. She shouldn't run away."

"She won't," Nick seemed to sigh. "She'll be still and quiet. Won't you, little one?"

The girl nodded and became quite unmoving.

"Let her go," Knight hummed.

"I can't. She's mine."

"Let her go."

The woman was confused. She stared at the young man.

"Let her go."

And sure enough, the woman dropped her hands away. The detective held out his arm to the girl. She stumbled toward him.

"Stay here," came the drone. The child sat by his feet. Nick touched her forehead and eased her down. "Sleep," he ordered softly.

The little girl closed her eyes and seemed to do just that.

The woman screamed as she jumped for the still figure. "You can't have her! She's mine!"

The detective blocked her way. She was reluctant to touch him. I could see her point.

"Why did you take her?" he asked in the same hypnotizing tone.

"She's mine," the woman repeated again.

"Why did you beat her?"

The woman began to back away. "She was bad. She yelled at me. At me. She shouldn't do that."

"So you hit her?"

"Only a little. How else will she learn?"

Nick followed the woman. I check the little girl. She was sleeping. Her left arm was broken.

"What about Crystal Hawkins?" the detective hummed.

"I don't know any Crystal."

"Don't you remember? A little girl with dark, curly hair. She was playing with a doll in her front yard."

"She was being bad. Playing in her good dress. And she was laughing too loud. Children should be seen and not heard," the perp quoted primly.

"Is that why you killed her?"

"I didn't kill anybody," she denied. She had backed her way to the edge of the roof and against the taller wall of an adjacent building.

"You beat her until she died," Nick whispered. "Why did you do that?"

"She bit me. She was a very bad girl. She shouldn't have done that. ...Go away. Leave me alone."

"No." Nick's voice was trembling now. It lost none of its hypnotic persuasion, but I thought I could detect controlled rage as well. "You're going to come with me," he said, "and explain to Crystal's parents why you killed her."

"I didn't mean for her to die," the woman whined. "But she was bad. She had to be taught."

"Come with me."

"Don't you touch me!" the other screamed. "I haven't done anything wrong." She attacked the young man, clawing at him. He caught her arms and pushed her back against the wall—hard. The woman collapsed. The detective bent over her.

"Is she dead?" I asked, not really caring.

He spun around.

I saw his face for the first time since he had left me in the alley. It had to be Nick's face, because it had Nick's voice. But the features I saw now had little resemblance to the ones I knew.

Glittering blue eyes that I remembered from another roof top glared out from under a heavy brow. Swollen cheek bones accented shrunken cheeks. Full lips were drawn away from teeth that showed an extra set of canines to either side of the front two incisors. Those teeth were longer than the others and looked all too functional.

What was he? But the back of my mind had already supplied an answer.

"Is she dead?" I repeated with surprising calmness.

"No," came a hoarse voice that didn't sound like his normal voice, or his Svengali act, either.

I sighed. Was I disappointed? I didn't want to know.

"Do you want to carry her down?" I suggested. "And I'll carry the girl?"

He just stared at me, breathing hard. It occurred to me that he could probably tell me to jump off the roof and I would do it. I went to the child and lifted her up in my arms. If I went, so would the girl. Mama Farrel didn't raise no dumb children.

"Well?" I asked.

Nick shook his head and turned back to the woman. He picked her up with ease and placed her on his shoulder. "After you, Doctor."

Was his face changing yet again?

I led the way down, all the while wondering why I was trusting this...being behind me. If he was what I thought he was, I could easily be dead soon and not pleasantly. Pathologists should never have imaginations.

My thoughts were thankfully interrupted by men tramping up the stairs. Nick's street people had called for backup.

A jumble of activity and explanations, most of which I can't remember now, followed. But I do remember not telling anyone exactly what I had seen, and feeling Nick watch me avidly. I waited outside until he finished his report. Then I followed him home.

He saw me and went on to his security system. "Come to collect your pound of flesh, Doctor?" he asked as he punched the numbers.

"Call it a pound of information," I countered. I followed him inside and into the elevator. Let's face it. I was in a following mood that night.

When we arrived at his loft, I took renewed interest at the contents. I could feel him still watching me.

"This is a dangerous game you're playing," he said.

I turned to study him. His face was completely back to normal.

"I've got an idea of how dangerous it could be," I said with more ease than I felt. "But I don't think so."

"And why is that?" he asked, taking off his gun and badge and putting them on a bookcase.

"You didn't kill that woman. I think I might have." It was all too true.

He made a wide circle around me and went to his tiny refrigerator. He brought out the lone bottle and took a long pull.

"It's blood, isn't it?" I asked foolishly.

"Of course. What else would it be?" He took another drink. "What do you want, Doctor?"

Good question. What did I want? "Call me Jack." A delaying tactic.

"I'm not into vivisection, Jack," he snapped.

"That's not what I had in mind."

"What is?!" he demanded.

"Like I said. Information." A new thought occurred. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, I have two options, don't I? I can leave L.A. Or I can kill you."

"I don't think leaving is necessary," I said smoothly. *Mouth don't fail me now.* "But I'm definitely not in favor of you killing me, either."

"What do you suggest?" He took another drink.

"A little conversation might be nice," I said, noticing that he seemed to be calmed down some. *The blood?*

"There's not much to say, is there?" he sighed, sounding very tired.

"I don't agree."

Light was beginning to stream through the large, frosted windows. He stepped up to some kind of control box that lowered hidden curtains. Then he flipped on some lights.

"Assuming we could get up some kind of dialogue," he said, "what makes you think you can keep this kind of secret?"

"I can be very good with secrets." And this one was a dandy.

"I don't suppose it matters. Most mortals wouldn't believe you, anyway."

"Mortals?" *An odd choice of words.*

"Yes, mortal. As in what you are. And I am not."

I stared into his eyes, dark now. *But changing?* I looked away with effort. "You're very good," I said.

"Of course. That's why this conversation is happening, because I'm so good at what I am."

"Could you...could you make me forget all this?" I got out finally.

"Yes," he grinned.

My turn to backpedal. "That's not a suggestion, by the way," I said quickly. "Look, Nick, I don't mean to hurt you."

"What makes you think you can?" he hissed. He drank again.

Just how much of that stuff does he need? Not now, Jack Farrel. First, get him to let you live. Then worry about details. "What do you mean?" I asked aloud. If he talked, he couldn't be thinking of ways to kill me. *Could he?*

"I mean I'm tired. Death isn't as frightening as it once was. It's not an end. It's an escape."

"You can't believe that," I protested.

"Don't I? Even I don't know how many I've killed, murdered. Blood that never washes away."

"You saved a child tonight. That should count for something."

"And I let a killer live. Not much of a showing against how many hundreds, is it?" He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked. *Sure, why not take his pulse and temperature?* But he did appear more and more lethargic.

"I need to sleep," he said, putting up his bottle. "Good day, Jack. You can let yourself out. Be sure to bring your wooden stake the next time you come." He sat heavily on his bed.

"I'm not a killer," I said indignantly.

"I am. You might remember that."

I was losing him. He was going to disappear on me. "Maybe I can help," I said.

"How?"

You would ask that. "I don't know. But give me a chance to find out."

He studied me. His eyes stayed dark. "Tell me, Jack," he said finally, "do you always take in strays?"

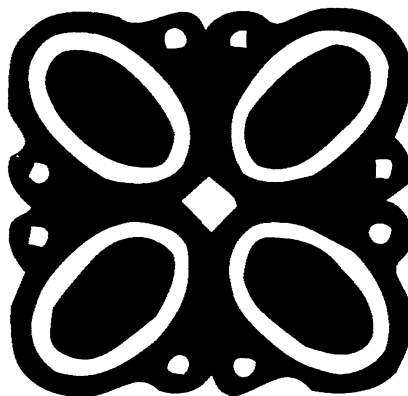
"Oh, yes. It gives my wife fits."

He lay back on his bed. "She's not going to like this one," he said slowly, his eye lids drooping.

"So she doesn't need to know about it. Good night, Nick."

The eyes were closed now. "Good day, Jack," he drifted off.

I grinned at him and let myself out.



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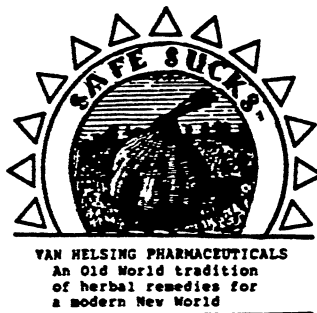
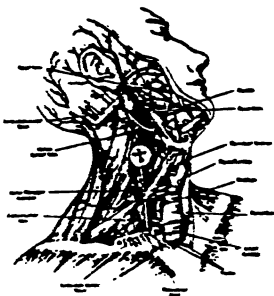
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SETBACK

By: B.N. Fish

(Story #2 in the Night Tales Universe)

"Jack?" The voice on the phone was harsh and raspy.

"Who is this?" I asked reasonably; I was busy.

"Tell me...what to do..."

Suddenly it dawned on me. "Nick?"

"...Help me..." The voice was weak beyond telling.

"Have you eaten?"

"...Can't. I..."

"Where are you?"

"You can't...come here."

"Are you at home?" I demanded.

"Not safe... Just tell me what..."

"I'm on my way," I said, even as I hung up the phone. I tore out of there like a bat out of the nether regions. Poor choice of simile. But at the time I was trying not to think of what I might find above the old theater where Nick lived.

I got by the security system easy enough. But it took me a few moments to realize that the elevator wasn't working. Then a few more to determine why: no electricity.

There had to be stairs somewhere. I found them and climbed them in darkness. There was no relief when I made it to the loft that served as Nick's apartment: the light switch didn't work. The large, empty-seeming room gaped open before me.

"Nick?" Silence. Was he here? "Nick!" Still nothing. It was almost too quiet. "What game are you playing, Nick?" I called. If I could make him mad, I might find out what was going on, the only problem being that there were times when Detective Knight's skin could be as thick as his partner, Schanke's.

"I know you're here, Nick. Someone had to flip the circuit breaker to cut the power here, but leave the alarm working outside." I heard only darkness. Was he here or not? My reasoning was sound. He had to be here.

"Are you trying to scare me? Trying to show me what a big, bad monster you are?" But in the back of my mind, I remembered the broken voice on the phone. Nick had never sounded so weak.

I felt along the walls, trying to find the elusive fuse box. I ran into just about everything in the

room. The only sounds were of my own making.

He was here.

"Can you see me?" I challenged. "A poor, stumbling mortal about to meet his master. Is that what you are, Nick? An immortal playing at being human?"

I found the switch and pulled the handle with something less than finesse. Soft lighting filled the room. I was almost surprised not to see him standing next to me, reaching for my throat.

Almost. I'm my own worst enemy at times.

"Nick?" I called again, taking in the scattered area. While I must have done the rearranging along the outer walls, the inner arrangement of laden tables and bookcases were all turned over and shattered.

Had there been a fight? Nick could more than hold his own with any mortal antagonist. But if one of his own kind found him again, he was more vulnerable now.

"Come on, Nick. If you're hurt, let me help. That's why you called me, remember?"

Finally, a noise, but it was from overhead. I looked to find Nick at last, hanging high above me from the structure for the skylights. He looked like a gangly spider stuck to the metal framework where no being, mortal or not, had a right to be.

"What are you doing?" I excel at inane questions.

"...Jack, go home..." came the raspy voice.

"I just got here. Are you trying to work on your Bela Lugosi impression, maybe?"

What was the matter with him? I looked for a way to get closer. He hadn't climbed up there. I couldn't reach him.

"Come down, Nick," I coaxed.

"No. I have to..."

"Have to what? Why did you call me?"

"Mistake. Go home..."

"Nope. What's the matter? Have you eaten?"

He moved. Actually, he looked as if he was trying to go higher, but couldn't manage it.

"When did you eat last?"

"Get out...of here."

"When did you eat last?" I repeated carefully.

I went to his minuscule kitchenette. It would have given my mother the horrors. There was half-eaten food on the counter and in the trash, all of it several days old. The tiny refrigerator was empty.

"When, Nick?"

"...Four days..."

Then it dawned on me: even the bottle was gone. "And blood? What about blood, Nick?" No reply. I couldn't see his face. Was it only weakness in his voice—or something more? "Where's the bottle, Nick? Up there with you?"

"...Get out of here, Jack."

"Where's the damn bottle?!"

Everything could hinge on that one item. He always kept it nearby, a tall, amber bottle filled with animal blood. No matter how much I ranted and raved, no matter how much or how little I got him to eat, he always kept that bottle—and drank from it from time to time. He wanted to change, but the need was still there. We both knew it.

Now the question remained: was he gluttoned on blood—or hungry for it?

"Nick," I repeated softly, "where is the bottle?"

"...Dumped it..."

"What?!"

"Only way I could..." He shuddered.

Hunger, then. Which was more dangerous? "Come down here, Nick," I said quietly.

"...You want to die?"

"Come down."

"...I can hear...your heartbeat from here."

"Let me help."

"...No help," he breathed as he moved again. But this time, he fell. He dropped to the floor, uncontrolled, and looking, for all the world, like a fallen angel. He hit with a crash.

I ran to find him dazed, his eyes bright and blue. It was sign of only a partial change, but he was so very weak.

He focused on me. "Get out. Now, Jack. ...Before I forget...you've tried to be...my friend."

I checked him over; no broken bones, but the lethargy was alarming. That and the gleaming eyes. "It's going to be all right, Nick. Don't worry."

"Go!" He shoved me away with surprising strength.

I hesitated only a moment when I saw the extended blood teeth. I could feel him watching me while I ran for the elevator.

Don't think. Just do it.

I stopped at a mini-market and picked up three two-liter soft drinks, then ran to the stockyard. Dumping the cola—or whatever it was—I filled all three from a vat of blood. I got a few odd looks even with my rushed story of experiments.

Back to the loft.

With a certain amount of caution, I entered the room with my gory burden. My momma didn't raise no dumb children.

"Nick?" I called, when I couldn't see him. He wasn't back at his awkward perch, either. I went to his kitchenette and got a steak knife. Quickly, I cut off the neck to one of the plastic containers.

"Nick, I have something for you." I held out the sloshing bottle to the apartment at large. "Can't you smell it? It's blood, Nick. For you."

Then I saw him. Fully altered now, he was almost unrecognizable as the young, gentle man I knew Nick to be. This was the vampire—monster and horror.

He bared his teeth, no recognition in his eyes as he advanced. His stare was fixed on me, not on what I carried. Quickly, and with no little amount of panic, I splashed his face.

That startled him.

"Here," I said, pushing the opened container toward him on the floor.

Nick fell on it, gushing blood down his throat and over his face. This creature had little resemblance to any sort of man.

Locking my teeth, I prepared the other two bottles and waited. The first bottle was empty in seconds, most of it flowing down his face and onto his clothes. His eyes acknowledged me now as perhaps something more than a meal. But he immediately dismissed me in favor of the second bottle. There was more control now, but the frantic consumption continued. He had actually started on the third container before he finally slowed and stopped, a kneeling figure bathed and surrounded by a scarlet river.

"Jack?" He stared at me, aghast. "What have I done?"

"No," I said quickly, "I brought this."

"You?" he echoed, bewildered.

"How do you feel?"

"Alive," he answered miserably.

"Come on. Let's get you cleaned up." I offered a hand.

"No," he shied away.

"I'm not going to leave you here like this," I said firmly. "Now, either you get up on your own...or I'm going to carry you." *Go ahead. Tell another one, Jack Farrel.*

Shakily, he got to his feet. The strength was there. But I wasn't sure about his will to live.

"Let's go." I led the way to his bathroom. "I know you're not crazy about water, but it's necessary." I pushed him into the shower stall.

"...Are you...all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Now, strip."

Faltering, he began pulling off his blood-sodden clothes. Before he got to his underwear, I turned on the faucet. It wasn't so much from my sense of modesty as from my reluctance to see him sobbing. He shuddered as the water sluiced over his body. The temperature was steaming, but he shivered as if in a blizzard.

"Okay, that's good enough. Come out of there." I turned off the water and wrapped him up in an oversized terry robe. He pulled away when I began to rub him down.

"Don't touch me."

"Fine," I refused to take offense. "Get to bed."

He remained there. So I went over and straightened out what was left of his bed.

"Jack...what happened?"

"What do you remember?"

Slowly, he shook his head. "I remember...being hungry."

I checked a smile. That about said it all. "Do you remember calling me?"

"Did I?"

"Yes. Now, get into bed."

To my surprise, he obeyed this time. I pulled up the bedcovers and tucked him in. My mother would have been proud.

"Did I hurt you?" asked a quiet voice.

"No, I told you. Go to sleep. I'll try to be here when you wake up."

"Let it go, Jack," Nick sighed. "It's not working. It hasn't worked. It won't work." His eyelids were drooping. I wondered how long it'd been since he'd rested.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow. Now sleep."

And he slept.

* * *

I spent the next hour or so wiping up the blood. Finally, I put cleaning rags and clothes alike in a garbage bag and deposited the whole works in a dumpster. Then I went home and collapsed into my own bed.

* * *

I did make it back to the loft about two hours before the sun set. I didn't know exactly when he'd wake up. I'd never kept that close a tab on him. But obviously I hadn't kept the right kind of tabs on him or this wouldn't have happened. Then again, how could I have known? It's not like there has been that much documentation on vampires.

That kind of productive reasoning occupied my time as I waited for Nick to come around.

He came around, all right. For some reason, I had expected the line between consciousness and unconsciousness to be sudden and clearly defined; one minute, asleep, and one minute, not. Instead, he started moving, jerking.

Nick was dreaming.

Then he was awake and gasping.

"Hi," I said quietly, moving into his line of sight. He fought for control. "I don't know why, but I never expected you to have nightmares," I went on conversationally.

"Vampires don't dream," he said through gritted teeth.

"I also expected you to be a better liar."

"I'm a very good liar," he countered. "I've had to be."

"How do you feel?"

He gazed up at me, looking like a condemned soul in hell. No. Forget that. He was my friend.

"Here," I shoved a filled cup into his hands, "drink this."

He wrapped long fingers around it. Trembling, he took a swallow. "It is over, then," he sighed despairingly.

"No. Yesterday was a setback, not the end. We just have to go slower, that's all."

"And this?" he asked, motioning slightly with the cup, then taking another drink.

"Well, consider it a concession to the facts. You need blood." I shrugged. "You also need to eat."

Nick closed his eyes and help the cup to his lips. Another lingering sip.

"So, what were you dreaming about?" I asked.

"I told you," he sighed, "I don't dream."

"Then what was it?"

"LaCroix used to tell me that only mortals need dreams."

"LaCroix? You were dreaming about LaCroix, then?"

"No." He took a deep breath. "I was...remembering LaCroix."

I considered that. "I suppose there is a difference," I finally conceded. "What about him? How did you meet him?"

He just looked at me.

"Come on, Nick. Talk to me."

"I almost killed you." His gaze was defiant: *Go ahead, argue that one.*

"You didn't." My best shot.

He drained the cup. "And would you have forgiven me when I ripped out your throat?"

You do have this gift for imagery, don't you? I took a breath. "No."

Nick got to his feet, leaving covers and modesty behind, and walked to the center of the room. He looked up at the skylight and began to lift his hands.

"No!" I bellowed, making a running leap for him. I attached myself to his arm. "If you fly out of here, you're taking me with you."

He looked down at me and suddenly, I could see what he saw: a frantic, pleading mortal trying to restrain a naked monster. Then he smiled, and the monster was gone. "Unclean, Jack."

"I deal with dead bodies everyday. What's more unclean than that?" I countered.

"I put those bodies there."

"If I believed that, I'd worry."

"You should worry."

"Right now, I'm more worried about this naked nut standing in the middle of the living room."

He sighed. "Don't you ever give up?"

"Well, I haven't been at it as long as you have."

"All right, Jack, you win."

"Good. Now, get on some clothes."

Nick obediently went to his closet.

"Tell me about LaCroix," I prompted.

"He's dead."

"How did you meet him?" I insisted.

"He was a teacher."

"And you were a student."

"Sort of."

"Sort of? Come on, Nick. I'd say something about pulling teeth, but somehow I don't think it would be very discreet under the circumstances. ...Talk to me. You were 'sort of' a student?"

He chose a plaid cotton shirt and pulled it from the hangar. "I used to hang around the park where he would go with his friends. He'd talk about music and art and politics. I didn't think he knew I was there."

"You were wrong," I ventured.

"I was wrong," Nick nodded. "I had climbed a tree to listen; they were talking about women. I didn't see him slip away. Suddenly, there was a sound in my ear, and the next thing I knew, I was falling. Just before I hit the ground, he caught me." The shirt fell unnoticed from his hand, crumpling at his feet.

"And you never guessed," I put in.

"No. I had never heard of vampires before. Even when he brought me over, he never used that word. I became immortal, not a vampire." He closed his eyes, remembering.

I strained for something to break the mood. "You are supposed to be getting dressed here."

"Oh, yeah." He stepped over the shirt, oblivious to it, and pulled on some underwear. "Sometimes I think the nudity bothers you more than the blood does."

"Who, me? I work with both, remember?"

"Except I'm alive." He looked straight at me.

"That you are," I agreed easily.

Nick rolled his head back and grimaced.

"Your jeans, Mr. Knight." I handed him the item and he put them on in silence. "So," I went on, "LaCroix took you under his wing."

A ghost of a smile. "You're a persistent cuss, aren't you?"

"It goes with the job."

"Which one, pathologist or Jewish mother?"

"Both. Now, about LaCroix..."

He nodded, resigned. "Okay, okay. LaCroix took me under his wing, figuratively, literally. He took care of me, taught me, showed me things, people I never knew existed."

"What about your family?"

"There was only my mother, by that time. We had had a certain amount of social position, but no money. Whatever we could get together went for food. LaCroix helped there, too."

"And you still didn't know?"

"There were a lot of things I didn't know," Nick admitted. "Still don't know. I've never known why he took an interest in me. I certainly didn't have much to offer."

"Maybe he was lonely."

Nick looked at me sharply. "It took a long time for me to understand how he could be lonely when he was constantly surrounded by people. He told me later to wait until I had a century or two behind me, then I would understand." He looked down at the shirt on the floor. "He was right."

"Just how old was LaCroix?"

"He came across in 1612. He survived the slaughter of the Huguenots, the French Revolution and Napoleon. But he didn't survive me."

"He was trying to kill you at the time," I snapped.

"Yeah."

Exasperated, I frowned. "He would have killed you."

Nick shook his head. "It hardly matters now."

"Even you can take only so much guilt."

"I'd better. There always seems to be more." He fell silent, contemplative.

"So," I prompted again, "how did LaCroix bring you over?" I leaned over and snagged the shirt, handing it to him. He nodded wearily and shrugged into it.

"He had said things about death and mortality, but I didn't listen. I didn't want to hear."

"Why?"

"I was terrified of dying. I had seen my father die in a carriage accident, my sister of one of the many diseases prevalent at the time. I watched their bodies grow hard and shriveled even before they were buried." Shaking fingers fumbled with the buttons. "Then my mother died. Food poisoning. She died in dirt and vomit." He shuddered violently. "LaCroix found me in the cemetery, sitting beside a mound of dirt, a pauper's grave. He took me away."

"The first time he took blood from me, it wasn't that big a deal. He took only a little and then I fell asleep."

"But didn't you realize what was happening?"

"Not then, no. It was just something he wanted. It was important to him. I owed it to him, if nothing else. But I wanted to give it."

I grew tired of watching him mis-button the shirt and gently slapped his hands away, starting from the bottom. "Doesn't it take an exchange of sorts?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"And he never explained it to you?"

"He did." Nick pulled back before I could get to the top two buttons, preferring to leave them undone. "He never forced me. It was my decision—to never die. ...He told me about almost everything before he brought me over. And he was right about most of it. I was stronger. I could hear better, smell things more acutely, see farther in less light. And fly. That's always been the best part. It's the one thing I've never regretted or grown tired of."

I searched for two socks that matched, found two that were only a slight shade off from each other, and handed them to him.

"Vampires are not really social creatures," he added, taking the socks and sitting down on the bed, "at least not with their own kind. There's too much competition for superiority, food. That I stayed with him as long as I did was unusual. It's one of the reasons it was so hard on both of us when I left him." He pulled the left sock on, and stared at the right one. "He was my friend."

I resisted the impulse to say, "I'm sorry." I wasn't. That kind of friendship was deadly. What was harder, however, was restraining the urge to ask why he had finally broken with LaCroix. He was too vulnerable now; it would wait.

"Okay," I said briskly, motioning for him to quit staring at the sock and put it on, "let's go get something to eat."

"I'm not hungry. Thank you," Nick said politely.

"Good." That was good news. "But I don't want you to get out of the habit."

Blue eyes glared up at me, a small twinkle behind them. "Who said I ever got into the habit?"

"Put on your shoes. It's about time you got into the groove, buster."

Nick grinned and shook his head. "You're a stubborn man, Jack Farrel."

"You'd better believe it." I struck a dramatic pose and crowed in my best Southern accent, "Ah have only just begun tuh fight!"

"Rhett Butler, you're not."

"That's Patrick Henry."

"Him, either." Nick slid into his loafers and followed me out of the loft into L.A.'s night air: a proper Jewish mother and his dutiful son.

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Chalk and Cheese 7	Available	23.00	25.00	31.00
Chalk and Cheese 8	Available	24.00	27.00	35.00
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Holiday Shrieks!	Available	19.00	21.00	27.00

BLAKE'S 7 ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
Blake, Rabble and Roll 1	Available	13.00	15.00	19.00
Blake, Rabble and Roll 2	Available	17.00	19.00	25.00
Blake, Rabble and Roll 3	Available	17.00	19.00	25.00
Blake, Rabble and Roll 4	Open for submissions			

QUANTUM LEAP ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
Green Eggs and Ham 1	Available	19.00	21.00	27.00
Green Eggs and Ham 2	Available	23.00	25.00	29.00
Green Eggs and Ham 3	Available	24.00	26.00	30.00
Green Eggs and Ham 4	Available	23.00	25.00	29.00
Green Eggs and Ham 5	Available	23.00	25.00	29.00
Green Eggs and Ham 6	Available	23.00	25.00	29.00
Green Eggs and Ham 7	Available	23.00	25.00	29.00
Green Eggs and Ham 8	Open for submissions.			

QUANTUM LEAP SLASH ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
Wham, Bam, Thank You, Sam! 1	Available	20.00	22.00	29.00
Wham, Bam, Thank You, Sam! 2	Available	23.00	25.00	32.00
Wham, Bam, Thank You, Sam! 3	Available	23.00	25.00	32.00
Wham, Bam, Thank You, Sam! 4	Open for submissions.			

VAMPIRE MULTI-MEDIA ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
Just My Type 1	Available	21.00	23.00	30.00
Just My Type 2	Available	22.00	23.00	30.00
Just My Type 3	Open for submissions.			

HIGHLANDER ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
Who Wants to Live Forever? 1	Available	19.00	20.00	28.00
Who Wants to Live Forever? 2	Available	19.00	20.00	28.00
Who Wants to Live Forever? 3	Open for submissions.			

HIGHLANDER SLASH ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
The Portrait Gallery	Available	13.00	15.00	19.00
The Brothers of Eros	Available	7.00	8.00	10.00

AIRWOLF ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
To Soar Like a Hawke	Available	18.00	20.00	25.00
Shell Game	Available	23.00	25.00	32.00

KUNG FU—THE LEGEND CONTINUES ZINES

<u>Title</u>	<u>Status</u>	<u>USA</u>	<u>Mexico/Canada</u>	<u>Overseas</u>
That Was Zen, This is Tao 1	Available	18.00	20.00	25.00

Tribbers who send disks: 3 1/2" and 5 1/4" disks accepted. All files must be in Word for Windows, PFSWrite, WordPerfect (any version), WordStar, Wang, MultiMate, DCA or ASCII. Please send a hard copy of your tribs with your disk.

Tribbers who send a hard copy only: Please print it out in letter-quality or near-letter quality (or on a typewriter) as the scanner will not scan draft dot matrix.

Policies: 3 pages or more of text/poems gets a free copy of the zine in which they appear in USA/Canada; 4 pages overseas.

3 full-page illos or more gets a free copy of the zine in which they appear; 4 pages overseas.

2 pages or less of text or 2 full-page illos or less gets \$5.00 off the price of the zine in which they appear.

Stories: I will place no restriction on slash/straight, page length or content, and will judge each story on its own merits. So, hey, what have you got to lose? Send me something!

WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T PRESS!

Mystery Frank

4103 8th St.

Baltimore, MD 21225-2136

OPEN FOR SUBMISSION

WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER? 3—an all-*Highlander* zine that will feature both Connor and Duncan MacLeod. Have an idea where the Immortals come from? Have an idea for a really spiffy *Hi* story that just won't leave you alone? I'd love to hear it!

IMMORTALIZED IN PRINT—a zine for stories based in the *Highlander* universe, but with other media characters as Immortals. For example, have you ever wondered why MacGyver could never kill Murdoc and get him to stay dead? He's an Immortal, of course. Thomas Magnum's wife really did die in Vietnam, but she's an Immortal, allowing her to show up later in the series. Are you getting the drift? Starsky got shot three times, and recovered. And, boy, was he surprised when he found out why he lived! Take your favourite media character and put him or her into the *Hi* universe. Then send that story to me!

MAC OF ALL TRADES—an all-*MacGyver* zine for those of you who can't get enough of the blond hunk on the Mac Channel, er, I mean, USA. (All MacGyver, all the time!) Don't feel you have to include clever MacGyverisms in your story; we want character-driven plots just as much. How is Pete adjusting after watching Mac and his newly-acquired son ride off into the sunset? And how is he handling his encroaching blindness? Is Jack Dalton still out there somewhere, ready to cajol Mac into another can't-miss get-rich-quick scheme? Let me hear from you, Mac fans!

THAT WAS ZEN, THIS IS TAO 2—a zine for *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* fans! This wonderful show has so many wonderful possibilities between Peter and his father, Peter and Blaisdell, between everyone and everyone! (We're talking straight love here, folks. No slash. Yet. <g>) Your story doesn't have to be as silly as the title of the zine (that's just because I love puns)—be as serious or as hurt/comfort as you like. Or do be silly. I'm open for just about anything.

AN AS-YET-UNNAMED *HARDCASTLE* AND *McCORMICK* ZINE—this zine doesn't have a title yet (and I'll give a free copy to the first person to suggest one I like), but it's open for submissions. Remember how good this show made you feel? Experience that feeling again! Immerse yourself in this fandom and send me a story from the heart, be it hurt/comfort or something to set you to giggling.

Also open for submissions are all my usual zine series as listed above. Something for everyone, so send me a story!